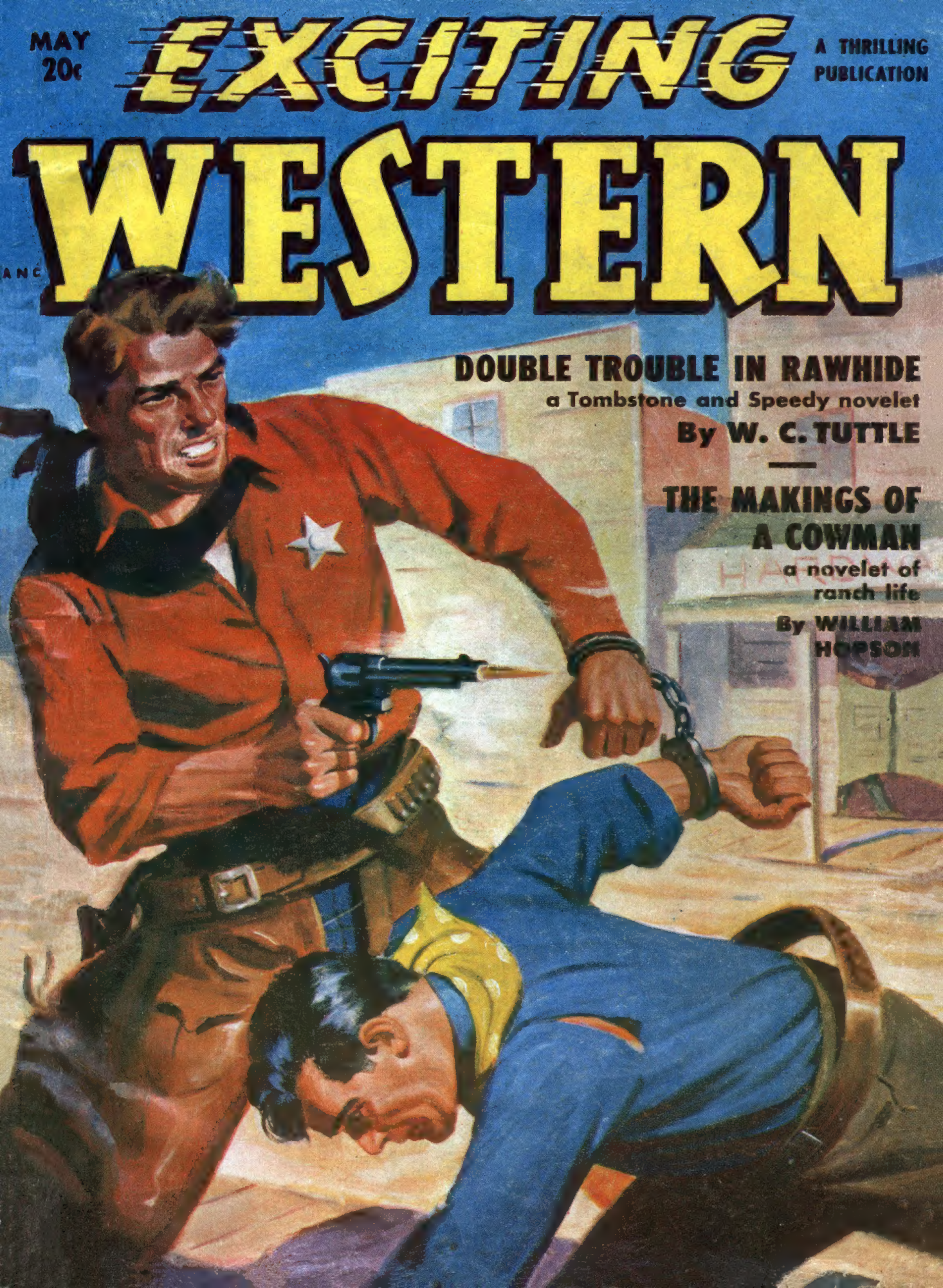
MAY
20¢

EXCITING WESTERN

A THRILLING PUBLICATION



DOUBLE TROUBLE IN RAWHIDE

a Tombstone and Speedy novelet

By W. C. TUTTLE

THE MAKINGS OF A COWMAN

a novelet of ranch life

By WILLIAM HOPSON

BUILD A FINE BUSINESS
FULL OR SPARE
TIME!

Air Cooled

NEW NYLON MESH FAST-SELLER...
MAKE MONEY FROM THE FIRST HOUR!

FREE SELLING OUTFIT

SLIP ON—
SLIP OFF!

Call on neighbors and friends all around home — show and sell amazing NEW KIND OF SHOE! Hidden elastic in front makes it easy to SLIP-ON, SLIP-OFF. No more broken laces, no more wrinkled tongues!

Just Blow through this shoe! Popular, fast-selling Air-Cooled feature with Genuine Nylon Mesh brings you quick orders easy as ABC!

Make up to $3.00 easy advance commission on every order you take — start in spare time if you prefer!

BETTER THAN A RETAIL SHOE STORE OF YOUR OWN

You can satisfy nearly every man and woman in your territory with over 160 dress, work, sport styles of the nation's finest COMFORT shoes! Offer your customers biggest selection. Fit them all SIMPLY, CORRECTLY with easy accurate methods. Draw on stock of 150,000 pairs — give real satisfaction.

WE SHOW YOU HOW TO SELL QUICK

You get big selling outfit, with Tested and Proved ways to make sales from the first hour you work! You get booklet of ideas written by 5,000 successful salesmen — "automatic" door openers — "magic" selling words — everything to make it easy for you to sell and make big money! Big ads in popular National magazines make you known as the expert Mason shoe fitter in your community.

REPLACEMENT OR REFUND OF MONEY
Guaranteed by Good Housekeeping
IF NOT AS ADVERTISED THEREIN

THE SIGN OF VALUE!
Good Housekeeping Guarantee Seal on Velvet-eez Air-Cushioned Insole shoes shows your customers they can't lose a dime! Send Coupon Today!

GREAT WOMEN'S LINE LIKE A BIG EXTRA FACTORY!

Scores of styles! Fast-Selling beauties in blue, green, red, tan, grey, brown, black and white bring you plenty of extra orders from housewives, waitresses, school girls, office girls, teen-agers—every home and office means you can sell to **both** men **and** women.

This sensational Velvet-eez Casual, sizes 4-10, width AA to EEE wanted by women from 16 to 60! High fashioned shoe brings restful relief on Cushion Insole that brings your customers back for more!

FOLLOW THIS MAN TO CASH!

"For the past four years, my average total weekly earnings have been around $80.00 per week—I couldn't have done it except for the liberal commissions paid by the company on this wonderful line of shoes and garments that really is above and beyond competition."

Charles Tuttle

Velvet-eez AIR CUSHION SELLS SHOES FAST!

You just say: "Feel that Cushion." When they do — THEY WANT, THEY BUY! Thousands of tiny air bubbles give new comfort to aching feet. Rush name for FREE Selling Outfit today!

THIS BRINGS FREE OUTFIT!

MASON SHOE MFG. CO.
Dept. M-736, Chippewa Falls, Wisconsin

Rush me your free selling outfit, including sensational Air-Cooled Genuine Nylon Mesh Shoe, 5-second Velvet-eez demonstrator, exciting new women's line, and garments that can bring me big, extra cash with a *little* extra effort. Send everything FREE AND PREPAID.

Name.....

Address.....

City and State.....

MASON SHOE MFG. CO.
Dept. M-736, Chippewa Falls, Wis.

Put yourself in the I.C.S.

HALL of FAME*

Join these men who have made their mark! Men who by dint of ambition, intelligence and sound, practical I.C.S. training now enjoy positions of leadership in business, industry and government.

The sooner you start, the better your chances of making the grade. Today, with the critical shortage of skilled labor, trained men are becoming leaders overnight. Hundreds of I.C.S. students are reporting promotions and pay increases, earning greater security for themselves and their families. How about marking and mailing the coupon today?

**Names and positions sent on request.*

INTERNATIONAL CORRESPONDENCE SCHOOLS

BOX 3969-U, SCRANTON 9, PENNA.

Explain fully about your course marked X:

Air Conditioning and Plumbing Courses
☐ Air Conditioning ☐ Heating ☐ Plumbing
☐ Refrigeration ☐ Steam Fitting

Chemical Courses
☐ Chemical Engineering ☐ Chemistry, Analytical
☐ Chemistry, Industrial
☐ Chemistry, Mfg. Iron & Steel
☐ Petroleum Refining ☐ Plastics
☐ Pulp and Paper Making

Civil Engineering, Architectural and Mining Courses
☐ Architectural Drafting ☐ Architecture
☐ Civil Engineering ☐ Coal Mining
☐ Contracting and Building ☐ Highway Engineering
☐ Reading Structural Blueprints
☐ Structural Drafting ☐ Structural Engineering

Communications Courses
☐ Electronics ☐ Radio General
☐ Practical FM and Television
☐ Radio Operating ☐ Radio Servicing
☐ Telephony ☐ Telegraph Engineering

Electrical Courses
☐ Electrical Drafting ☐ Electrical Engineering
☐ Power House Electric ☐ Practical Electrician

Internal Combustion Engines Courses
☐ Automobile ☐ Aviation
☐ Diesel Engines ☐ Gas Engines

Mechanical Courses
☐ Aeronautical Engineer's, Jr. ☐ Aircraft Drafting
☐ Forging ☐ Foundry Work
☐ Heat Treatment of Metals
☐ Industrial Engineering ☐ Industrial Instrumentation
☐ Industrial Metallurgy ☐ Machine Shop
☐ Mechanical Drafting ☐ Mechanical Engineering
☐ Patternmaking—Wood, Metal
☐ Reading Shop Blueprints ☐ Sheet-Metal Worker
☐ Ship Drafting ☐ Toolmaking

Railroad Courses
☐ Air Brake ☐ Car Inspector ☐ Diesel Locomotive
☐ Locomotive Engineer ☐ Locomotive Fireman
☐ Locomotive Machinist ☐ Steam-Diesel Loco. Engineer

Stationary Engineering Courses
☐ Marine Engineering
☐ Power Plant Engineering ☐ Steam Engineering

Textile Courses
☐ Cotton Manufacturing
☐ Loom Fixing ☐ Rayon Weaving
☐ Textile Designing ☐ Woolen Manufacturing

Business and Academic Courses
☐ Accounting ☐ Advertising
☐ Bookkeeping ☐ Business Administration
☐ Certified Public Accounting ☐ Business Law
☐ Commercial Art ☐ Cost Accounting ☐ Federal Tax
☐ Foremanship ☐ Frenclf ☐ Good English
☐ High School ☐ Illustration—Lettering
☐ Industrial Supervision ☐ Postal Civil Service
☐ Retailing ☐ Retail Business Management
☐ Salesmanship ☐ Secretarial
☐ Spanish ☐ Stenography
☐ Traffic Management ☐ Typing

*Name*_____ *Age*___

*Home Address*_____

*City*_____ *State*____

*Present Position*_____

*Working Hours*____ *A.M. to*____ *P.M.*

*Employed by*_____

*Length of Service in World War II*____

Enrollment under G.I. Bill approved for World War II Veterans. Special tuition rates to members of the Armed Forces.

EXCITING WESTERN

Vol. 21, No. 2 A THRILLING PUBLICATION May, 1951

A Tombstone and Speedy Novelet

DOUBLE TROUBLE IN RAWHIDE

By W. C. TUTTLE

When the rollicking range sleuths are handed the loot of a train robbery, they keep folks guessing while they clear the tracks for some fast action! 9

Another New Complete Novelet

THE MAKINGS OF A COWMAN ..... **William Hopson** 44
Ned Burns was a gaunt gray wolf of the ranges, and neither drouth nor storm nor gun-blazing peril could touch his loyalty

A Story of the Owlhoot

LAWMAN, DRAG THAT IRON! ..... **Jonathan Craig** 38
Town Marshall Callan of Hangtree arranges a deal with Kid Lavender—in order to make the law look good

Western Fiction Classics

DOOM WAITS AT SNAKE BAR ..... **Gunnison Steele** 65
A flurry of shots, a rattle of hoofs—and the fight's on!
BUCKSKIN BRIGADE ..... **Dabney Otis Collins** 74
A novelet of vengeance-ready mountain men in action
NO GALS IN NOGALES ..... **Syl MacDowell** 90
A hard-hitting novelet in which the law deals a marked deck
EVERY TRAIL HAS A RIDER ..... **Wayne D. Overholser** 105
Black guns bellow at the Three Card Saloon!

Features

TRAIL BLAZERS ..... **Captain Ranger** 6
THE COWBOY HAD A WORD FOR IT ..... **Chuck Stanley** 63
"OH, GIVE ME A HOME—" ..... **Bess Ritter** 89

"Doom Waits at Snake Bar," Copyright, 1942, by Better Publications, Inc., and originally published in November, 1942, Popular Western. "Buckskin Brigade," Copyright, 1937, by Standard Magazines, Inc., and originally published in August, 1937, Thrilling Adventures. "No Gals in Nogales," Copyright, 1936, by Beacon Magazines, Inc., and originally published in January, 1937, Popular Western. "Every Trail Has a Rider," Copyright, 1942, by Better Publications, Inc., and originally published in September, 1942, Popular Western.

EXCITING WESTERN published every other month and copyright, 1951, by Better Publications, Inc., 10 East 40th Street, New York 16, N. Y. N. L. Pines, President. Subscription (12 issues), $2.40; single copies, $.20. Foreign and Canadian postage extra. Entered as second class matter March 20, 1945, at the Post Office at New York, N. Y., under the act of March 8, 1879. Manuscripts must be accompanied by self-addressed stamped envelopes, and are submitted at the author's risk. Names of all characters used in stories and semi-fiction articles are fictitious. If the name of any living person or existing institution is used, it is a coincidence. PRINTED IN THE U.S.A.

I Will Show You How to LEARN RADIO-TELEVISION SERVICING OR COMMUNICATIONS by Practicing in Spare Time

YOU PRACTICE RADIO SERVICING

You build the modern Radio shown below as part of my Servicing Course. I send you speaker, tubes, chassis, transformer, loop antenna, everything you see pictured and EVERYTHING you need to build this modern Radio Receiver. Use it to make many tests, get practical experience.

YOU PRACTICE RADIO COMMUNICATIONS

I send you all the parts to build Transmitter shown below as part of my new Communications Course. Conduct actual procedure of Broadcast Operators, practice interesting experiments, learn how to actually put a transmitter on the air.

VETERANS Get this Training under G. I. Bill — MAIL COUPON

NEW

I TRAINED THESE MEN

"After graduating, worked for servicing shop. Now Chief Engineer of three Police Radio Stations."—S. W. DINWIDDIE, Jacksonville, Illinois.

"While learning, made $5 to $10 a week in spare time. Now have a profitable spare time shop."—L. ARNOLD, Pontiac, Mich.

"I accepted a position as Radio and Television Technician . . . was promoted to manager of Television Service and Installation."—L. HAUGER, San Bruno, California.

"Have my own shop. Am authorized serviceman for five manufacturers and do servicing for 7 dealers."—P. MILLER, Maumee, O.

"Four years ago, a bookkeeper on a hand-to-mouth salary, am now a Radio Engineer ABC network."—N. H. WARD, Ridgefield Park, New Jersey.

"When I enrolled, had no idea it would be so easy to learn. Have equipped my shop out of spare time earnings. I am clearing about $40 to $60 a month."—J. D. KNIGHT, Denison, Tex.

I Will Train You at Home with MANY KITS OF PARTS I SEND

Do you want good pay, a job with a bright future and security? Would you like a profitable shop of your own? The fast growing, prosperous RADIO-TELEVISION industry is making these opportunities for you. Radio alone is bigger than ever. 90 million home and auto Radios, 3100 Broadcasting Stations, expanding use of Aviation and Police Radio, Micro-Wave Relay, Two-Way Radio for buses, taxis, etc., are making opportunities for Servicing and Communications Technicians and FCC-Licensed Operators.

Television is TODAY'S Good Job Maker

In 1946 only 6,000 TV sets sold. In 1950 over 5,000,000. By 1954, 25,000,000 TV sets will be in use, according to estimates. Over 100 TV Stations are operating in 35 states. Authorities predict there will be 1,000 TV Stations. This means new jobs, more jobs, good pay for qualified men.

Many Soon Make $10 A Week Extra in Spare Time

Keep your job while training at home. Hundreds I've trained are successful RADIO-TELEVISION TECHNICIANS. Learn Radio-Television principles from illustrated lessons. Get PRACTICAL EXPERIENCE experimenting with circuits common to Radio and Television. Many students make $5, $10 a week extra fixing neighbors' Radios in spare time. Special Booklets start teaching you the day you enroll.

Send Now for 2 Books FREE—Mail Coupon

Send for my FREE DOUBLE OFFER. Get actual Servicing lesson. Also get my 64-page book, "How to Be a Success in Radio-Television." Read what my graduates are doing, earning. Send coupon in envelope or paste on postal. J. E. SMITH, President, Dept. 1EQ, National Radio Institute, Washington 9, D. C. OUR 38TH YEAR.

NOW! Advanced Television Practice

Now, special TV kits furnished to build high-definition SCOPE . . . . RF OSCILLATOR with flyback power supply . . . . complete TV SET . . . . many other units. You see pulse, trapezoidal, saw-tooth wave forms. Get valuable PRACTICAL EXPERIENCE locating and correcting TV troubles. Mail coupon for facts and pictures.

A TESTED WAY TO BETTER PAY... MAIL COUPON NOW

Good for Both - FREE

The ABC's of SERVICING

How to Be a Success in RADIO-TELEVISION

MR. J. E. SMITH, President, Dept. 1EQ
National Radio Institute, Washington 9, D. C.

Mail me FREE Lesson and 64-page book.
(No salesman will call. Please write plainly.)

NAME..... AGE.....

ADDRESS.....

CITY..... ZONE..... STATE.....

☐ Check if Veteran — Approved for Training Under G. I. Bill

THE call of the trapline is part of our outdoor heritage. In the West the thrills of the fur-bearer trail brought fame to the great wilderness that stretched for endless, unknown miles beyond the Western bank of the swirling Mississippi.

The early voyageurs, the salty mountain men literally opened the West to eventual settlement. They did it with beaver plews—and traplines. The prospectors, the cattlemen, and the sturdy pioneers who homesteaded their one hundred and sixty acres of virgin soil all followed the trappers' paths across the West.

Today the buffalo have gone. The days of unlimited beaver pelts are past. But trapping is still part of the outdoor West. In fact under enlightened long range conservation programs, both State and Federal, the annual take of Western fur-bearing animals is, in many instances, gradually increasing.

A Fifty-Million Dollar Take

Throughout the entire country, the Western states included, the capture of wild fur-bearers by trappers, both part time and professional, is a business that runs well into the millions every year. A fifty million fur take is about the annual average.

Professional trapping is a skilled, thrilling outdoor calling. It may not make a man rich. But it does afford an opportunity for the outdoor enthusiast and nature lover to provide his own security in a manner that is as old as man himself. Trapping fur-bearers dates back to the prehistoric cavemen who used ingenious snares and deadfalls to capture the wild animals that provided them and their families with meat and clothing, and even covering for the cold floors of the caves in which they lived.

Though snares and deadfalls can still be used successfully, steel traps are the standard equipment of modern trappers. Long experience has proven them to be the surest and most economical means of capturing valuable fur-bearers.

Moreover steel traps have the following important advantages. They can be easily transported, set in a variety of ways in all situations on land or under water and are easily concealed from a wary quarry. Then, too, steel traps can be tended in great numbers, and perhaps more important than any other single factor, they do not injure the valuable fur.

As most every country-raised youngster knows, trapping does not have to be a full time job. In likely locations close to home almost anyone can set out a few traps and pick up a dab of pelt money plus plenty of experience.

Good catches especially of the more common fur-bearers can often be made in woods and swamp lands bordering settled country towns and farm communities.

Pioneer Living

Think it over, if you have to make a living in true pioneer fashion in the wide reaches of the great forest and mountain country of the West.

Winter is of course the time to trap. It is then that the beautiful, thick pelts of the wild creatures are in their prime and bring their highest prices. But planning should be started early. Late summer is not too soon to begin looking over the ground you intend to trap. Note by their tracks and signs where the various animal runs are. Pick out the likeliest spots for making your sets. Study all you can about the habits of the wild creatures.

Then when the season actually starts you will have a good preliminary idea of the fur-bearer population in the section you plan to trap, the kind of fur-bearers you may expect to catch and the places to set your traps where they will bring in the best returns.

Tips on Trapping

Here are some general tips on trapping to help the novice get his share of pelt money whether he sets his traps in some likely

section near his home locale, or deep in the Western wilderness.

Baiting fur-bearers to lure them to the trap is accepted practice. But never put bait on the pan of a trap. Old-fashioned traps were always made with holes in the pan for strings to tie bait on, as if the trapper expected to catch his quarry by the nose.

The truth is few animals are taken by the head or body. They are almost always taken by the leg. The pan's real purpose is to provide a trigger for the animal to set his foot on, thus springing the trap and gripping the fur-bearer's lower leg with a secure hold that will keep him where he is until the trapper arrives to visit the set.

If possible place your bait above the trap set. This can often be done by putting it on a stick or twig placed directly over the trap itself.

In some of the sets an enclosure is so arranged that the animal will have to step on the trap to reach it. In either case the idea is to place the bait so that the approaching fur-bearer will have to step on the trap—not sniff at it—to investigate the lure that has aroused his curiosity.

How Many Traps?

No definite rule can be made concerning the number of traps one person can tend on a trapline.

A lot depends on the particular kind of country you are trapping, the number and kind of fur-bearers in it and whether you intend to cover your trapline afoot or not. It is now possible in many trapping sections of the U.S. to run a flivver trapline, a modern system of tending widely scattered traps that was wholly unknown to trappers of an earlier generation.

Generally speaking it is better to run fewer sets that can be tended frequently than to plan an over-extended trapline. Seventy-five to a hundred traps properly looked after is a sufficient chore for any trapper. Only the very experienced should attempt to handle more.

Skin and cure all pelts as soon as possible after the animal has been killed. Dry the furs in an airy place where it is cool, but never do it in the direct sunlight or before a fire.

Don't use salt or any "preparation" in curing skins. Don't even wash them in water. Simply stretch and dry them just as they are when taken from the animal. Commercial stretching frames of wire may be used, or old-fashioned stretching boards split from pine or cedar.

The job doesn't sound as difficult as you might expect, does it?

—CAPTAIN RANGER.

OPPORTUNITIES AHEAD!
TRAIN FOR A FUTURE IN
DIESEL

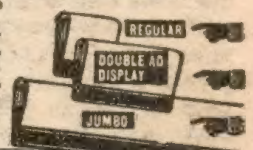
Prepare for the big earning power of Diesel Trained Men. Start learning at home, in spare time. UEI's easy, practical training covers all phases of DIESEL engine operation, fuel systems, auxiliary equipment, repairs and maintenance. Also new Scientific Auto Motor Tune-up. After home course, you come to Chicago for actual practice in UEI's modern shop under experienced instructors. GET ALL THE FACTS FREE. WRITE TODAY!

DIESEL DIVISION UTILITIES ENGINEERING INSTITUTE
2525 Sheffield Avenue, Dept. DR-7 Chicago 14, Illinois

MAKE EXTRA MONEY

EVERY BUSINESS EVERYWHERE USES UNION LABEL BOOK MATCHES

No experience needed to earn big daily commissions. Be a direct factory representative of the world's largest exclusive UNION LABEL Book Match manufacturer. Prospects everywhere. Feature Glamour Girls, Hillbillies, scenics and dozens of other styles—Double Books—Jumbo Books—nearly 100 color combinations. New, bigger portfolio makes this fastest selling line a real profit maker for you. Write TODAY for full details.



SUPERIOR MATCH CO.
Dept. R-553 7528 S. Greenwood Ave., Chicago 19, Illinois
West Coast Salesmen, write Box 1087, San Jose, Calif.

High School Course at Home
Many Finish in 2 Years

Go as rapidly as your time and abilities permit. Course equivalent to resident school work—prepares for college entrance exams. Standard H. S. texts supplied. Diploma. Credit for H. S. subjects already completed. Single subjects if desired. High school education is very important for advancement in business and industry and socially. Don't be handicapped all your life. Be a High School graduate. Start your training now. Free Bulletin on request. No obligation.

AMERICAN SCHOOL, Dept. H-558 Drexel at 58th, Chicago 37

SEND FOR THIS FREE!

Make money. Know how to break and train horses. *Write today for this book FREE*, together with special offer of a course in Animal Breeding. If you are interested in Gaiting and Riding the saddle horse, check here ( ) *Do it today—now.*

BEERY SCHOOL OF HORSEMANSHIP
Dept. 825 Pleasant Hill, Ohio

500 Ft. 2 Ply Nylon 25 lb. test

Level Fly Line, size E & D, 75 ft. $1.00

FLIES ASSORTED 10 for $1.00	500 Ft. LINEN LINE 24 lb. test	150 Ft. 3 Ply Nylon 85 lb. test	250 Ft. 3 Ply Nylon 45 lb. test

BRAIDED NYLON FISHING LINES

200' 18 or 20 lb. T 175' 35 lb. Test	150' 50 lb. Test 125' 75 lb. Test	100' 100 lb. Test 50' 200 lb. Test

Above lines available in longer lengths.
Send check or money order. We pay postage.
MAC-MILLS Dept. T-5 Pleasant Valley, N. Y.

How to Make Money with Simple Cartoons

A book everyone who likes to draw should have. It is free; no obligation. Simply address FREE BOOK

CARTOONISTS' EXCHANGE
Dept. 75 Pleasant Hill, Ohio

ARE FLYING SAUCERS REALLY SPACE SHIPS FROM MARS?

Here's the breathtaking inside story... even stranger than fiction!

A man of science gives an eyewitness report that'll make your hair stand on end! A huge "saucer", sealed like a pressurized cabin, and inside—well, you'll just have to read BEHIND THE FLYING SAUCERS to find the answer to the most amazing phenomenon of the century! You just can't afford to miss this sensational book which has set the whole country talking!

The Most-Talked About Book of the Year!
Originally sold for $2.75

ORIGINAL-EDITION PRICE from $2.00 to $3.00
POPULAR LIBRARY REPRINT PRICE
25¢

STRANGER AND ALONE
by J. Saunders Redding
Shelton was a mulatto—and an outcast. A powerful drama of a man who betrayed his people!

MY FORBIDDEN PAST
by Polan Banks
A notorious "madame's" society granddaughter in old New Orleans. Now an RKO movie!

SOLDIERS' DAUGHTERS NEVER CRY
by Audrey E. Lindop
Jix broke every rule to get her man—even became mistress to a man whom she hated!

MY OLD MAN'S BADGE
by Ferguson Findley
Malone joins a gang of dope peddlers to find his dad's murderer. Does he live to tell the tale?

ORDER THESE BEST SELLERS BEFORE IT'S TOO LATE!

POPULAR LIBRARY, INC., Dept. TFG5
10 East 40th St., New York 16, N. Y.

Please send me pospaid the Popular Library Books I have checked. I enclose 25c (in coin or in U.S. stamps of small denominations) per copy. (We pay postage for orders of 4 books or more.) If ordering less than 4 books, please enclose 5c per book extra for postage.

☐ **BEHIND THE FLYING SAUCERS** By Frank Scully
☐ **MY FORBIDDEN PAST** By Polan Banks
☐ **MY OLD MAN'S BADGE** By Ferguson Findley
☐ **STRANGER AND ALONE** By J. Saunders Redding
☐ **SOLDIERS' DAUGHTERS NEVER CRY** By Audrey E. Lindop

NAME.....

ADDRESS.....

CITY & ZONE.....STATE.....

A Tombstone and Speedy Novelet by W. C. TUTTLE

When the rollicking range sleuths are handed the loot of a train robbery, they clear the tracks for action!

DOUBLE TROUBLE in RAWHIDE

CHAPTER I

Train Holdup

SLOWLY "Tombstone" Jones uncoiled his seven-foot length of skinny manhood from the depths of an old platform rocker in the shade

of the hotel porch, cuffed his sombrero back from his long, bony face, and looked sleepily at his partner "Speedy" Smith. Speedy was only five feet, seven inches tall and as streamlined as a fly-rod. There wasn't enough meat on the two of them to make a sandwich for a sparrow. Tombstone sighed and said, "Huh?"

Speedy drew a telegram from his pocket. Tombstone said, "We heard from him, huh?"

"Yeah," nodded Speedy. "It says, 'Go

TOMBSTONE JONES

at once to Rawhide City and see John Briggs without fail."

"Without what?" asked Tombstone.

"Without fail, it says."

Tombstone shook his head, crossed his long legs and sighed deeply.

"Jim Keaton," he said, "is gettin' complicated. What's a fail? And how do yuh know when this here Briggs person is without one?"

"Listen, Knot-Head," said Speedy, "a fail is—well, it means we can't fail to see him."

"Can't huh? Keaton ort to know us better than that, Speedy."

"Well, anyway, we've got to find out how to get to Rawhide City."

"The shortest way, huh? I tell yuh, we're goin' to have rain."

"Rain?" snorted Speedy. "With a sky like that?"

"We will so," declared Tombstone. "My toes are actin' up. Don't laugh, you skinny little wart. I inherited that gift from my pa. He could tell weather a week away."

"Maybe you inherited somethin' from yore pa—but yuh're wearin' my socks. Why don'tcha ever buy some that fit yuh?"

"These fit all right—and I shore love green socks."

"Green socks? Tombstone Jones, did you take my Sunday socks out of my warbag and—you've got the gall to set there and—"

"Tomorrow is Sunday, remember? I'm breakin' 'em in for yuh."

Speedy groaned and sat down in an old chair.

"All right, all right," he sighed. "If you want to cinch up a number twelve foot in a sock that was built for a seven boot, hop to it, but don't prophesy weather 'cause yore toes hurt. Let's go find out how to get to Rawhide City."

TOMBSTONE got slowly to his feet, shook himself like a lean old hound, and yanked his hat over his eyes.

"And we won't ask no bartender this time," he declared. "They're the biggest liars unhung. You know how I hate a liar, Speedy."

"Professional jealousy," sighed Speedy.

The old proprietor of the general store listened to their question, looked them over thoughtfully, and said to Tombstone:

"Pardner, was you born on a stretcher?"

"No, I was born on a Monday," replied Tombstone soberly.

"We've got to go to Rawhide City," reminded Speedy.

"Well, I'll tell yuh. You can go to Rimrock, cut back to Rojo Springs and go to

Rawhide City from there. Mebbe seventy-eighty miles, all told."

"Told what?" queried Tombstone.

"I'll do the tellin' from here on in," remarked the man. "Let me see-e-e—if I was goin' to Rawhide City and didn't want to dawdle much, I'd go from here to Wampas Springs—that's the end of the road. Then I'd pull out and foller the railroad right-of-way all the way to Rawhide, plumb over the divide."

"Yuh didn't say how far it was," reminded Speedy.

"'Course I didn't. How'd anybody know how far it is?"

"Did anybody ever go thataway and live to tell about it?" asked Tombstone.

"Son," replied the old man, "that's somethin' I don't know. Yuh see, they never came back to tell me."

"Why," asked Speedy, "would anyone want to come back here?"

"I wouldn't."

"How come yuh stayed here?" asked Tombstone.

"Danged wagon broke down, thirty-five years ago. Never got it fixed. Fix it m'self some day, I reckon. Anythin' else you'd like t' know?"

"Yeah," drawled Tombstone. "Is it goin' to rain?"

"What on earth gave yuh that crazy idea?"

"My toes ache—and it's sure sign."

"Toes ache? At yore height? Huh. Well, it could. Does real well here, too, when it gits started. Opens up every pore. Hope yuh like Rawhide City."

They stayed that night at Wampus Springs, which swelled the population to exactly five souls. The depot agent, saloonkeeper, postmaster and our two heroic cattle detectives. The saloonkeeper told them they'd have to start early in the morning to make Rawhide City by dark; so they were out and traveling before daylight. The air was heavy, with a distinct feel of rain. The saloonkeeper refused to guarantee they'd find Rawhide City. He explained: "Yuh can't miss Yolo. It's just a little depot and a water-tank. Then yuh turn north, oh, let's say, seven eight miles."

Tombstone said, soberly, "Seven, eight miles."

"That's what I told yuh."

"That's what yuh told me to say," argued Tombstone. "How far is it?"

"Mebbe ten miles, I dunno. You stick to the right-of-way fence and you can't miss Yolo."

SPEEDY SMITH

"How far is it?" asked Speedy. The saloonkeeper screwed up his face, calculated carefully and replied;

"Well, it's a fur piece."

Now they were a "fur piece" from Wampas Springs, and it began raining. Speedy, unlashing his war-sack from behind his saddle, snorted some choice profanity. Tombstone hadn't unlashed his bag yet. He said:

"We left both of them slickers in Wampas Springs."

"And yore toes told yuh it was goin' to rain," complained Speedy.

"And, by golly, I was right. Still, I

ain't crowin', Speedy."

Speedy looked back in the general direction of Wampas Springs, settled back in his saddle and looked toward what they hoped was the direction to Rawhide City.

"We're caught in the middle," he groaned. "If we went back to Wampas Springs we'd be too darned wet for the slickers to do us any good; we might as well go ahead. If Jim Keaton only knowed what we have to go through as association detectives, I'll betcha—no, I won't either—he's got a heart of stone."

GENTLY tilting his head sideways, Tombstone allowed the accumulated water to slosh off the brim of his hat.

"He's a slave driver, that's all he is," he said soberly. "Stickin' us out here in all this rain. Maybe we catch cold and die.

"Feels like a canvas sack," said Tombstone

What'll he care? I ask yuh, what'll he care? You cain't answer, huh?"

"You die and I'll ask him," replied Speedy miserably.

"Yea-a-ah? So you didn't die. You pull through and be a hero. Fine thing!"

If there was anything, physical or mental, that could possibly identify these two as operatives for the Cattlemen's Association, not even Jim Keaton, the secretary for the association, had ever discovered it. Tombstone couldn't read nor write; Speedy could do both—a little. Tombstone fondly believed that he could out-lie any man on earth, except Speedy. They exasperated Jim Keaton to the point of firing both of them when they sent him hair-brained telegrams or failed to

make a report of a closed case. Their ignorant efficiency was aided and abetted by the fact that no one on earth would ever suspect them to be lawmen.

Darkness found them still following the right-of-way fence, soaked and completely miserable. It wasn't easy—following that fence, what with washouts, canyons, brush rocks, and the rain that loosened the surface soil. Heavy clouds hung low over the hills, making the world as dark as the inside of a black cat. They worked their way around a railroad cut, and came out onto fairly level going at last.

"Looks like we're over the hills," remarked Tombstone.

"What looks like it?" growled Speedy painfully.

"My horse feels kinda level," replied Tombstone. "Hey! Here comes a train! See the headlight?"

"Mebbe they're bringin' a brass band to greet us," suggested Speedy. "Why start cheering—they run trains on a railroad track—remember."

"Well, it kinda shows that we ain't lost yet, Speedy. Slowin' down, ain't it? Huh! Mebbe we've reached Yolo and don't know it."

"Funny train," remarked Speedy. "No lights, except the engine."

They pulled up against the wire fence. The engine, its headlight streaming through the rain, the exhaust slowed down, was partly visible. Then there was another light, hardly visible, and they heard a voice speaking sharply, the words inaudible.

Somewhere a door banged shut, and they could see what seemed to be a blur of figures around the glow from the engine. A man was coming toward them, crashing brush, swearing a little. He came up to the fence, panting heavily. Tombstone had swung his horse in close to the fence, and the man said:

"Take this, will yuh. I can't see—"

Tombstone reached down across the fence, and his fingers locked around some sort of a canvas sack. The man said:

"Worked like a charm. Get goin', you two, and we'll meet yuh later."

Then he went crashing back toward the engine, which suddenly came to life and began backing, banging the couplers loudly. Speedy said:

"What on earth is this all about? Tombstone, what did he give you?"

"I dunno what it is. Feels like a canvas sack."

"Well, of all the silly danged things!" exploded Speedy.

"C'mon," ordered Tombstone. "He said for us to git goin', didn't he?"

"Yeah, he did, I think. Said he'd see us later. Shucks, he never seen us this time, as far as that goes."

Tombstone swung away from the fence, and they went slopping along beside it. Suddenly Speedy swore explosively.

"Pick up a cactus?" asked Tombstone.

"Picked up nothin'! Listen, Knot-Head! That was a train robbery!"

"Do yuh think so?"

"Of course, I think so! They've cut off the engine and express car, pulled it out here and cleaned out the safe. That's why it's backin' up. Don'tcha see, Tombstone."

"It ain't clear to me yet. Why would they go to all that trouble and hand the loot to strangers?"

"Give me time to think, will yuh? I wish I had a chance to get out of the rain long enough to think."

"Me, too. All I can think of is ducks. Whoa! Wait a minute."

DISMOUNTING, Tombstone produced a dry match and lighted it.

"We've done hit a road!" he announced proudly. "This must be the road to Rawhide City. Which way is north?"

"I don't know," admitted Speedy.

"Well, I'll tell yuh a way yuh can't miss," said Tombstone. "If it's afternoon, yuh stand facin' the sun, hold out both arms, point yore fingers, and yore right finger will point north."

"That's awful clever," agreed Speedy. "All we've got to do is set here until tomorrow afternoon—and hope the sun shines."

"Yeah, that's right, ain't it? Well, there's another way. They say that moss grows on the north side of trees."

"That's fine!" snorted Speedy. "How can yuh tell which is the north side, if yuh don't know which way is north?"

"Yeah, that's right—it *is* a drawback. Well, we might as well foller the road—it's better'n wet brush, slappin' yuh in the face."

They rode on a short distance, when Tombstone said, "That last idea of mine wasn't very good."

"What idea?" asked Speedy.

"About the moss on a tree. Where could we find a tree in this darkness?"

"Or the sun shinin' in the west," added Speedy.

The heavy clouds began breaking and the rain merely became a drizzle. Suddenly the tip of the moon showed, giving them enough illumination to see a big stable, and the road led straight up to it. They were at the end of the road. There was an old ranchhouse, but no lights were showing.

"We might not be welcome," Speedy said.

"In my present condition, I don't care," remarked Tombstone. "I'd fight for a dry

place to lay the carcass in."

There was no one at the old ranch-house, and they decided that it was just an old empty hulk. They went down to the stable and opened the door. The stable was slightly musty from disuse, but dry. Tombstone lighted a match and found two old lanterns, hanging on a peg. He lighted one, and headed for the ladder to the loft, where he made a quick inspection.

"Enough hay for a bed and a bit left over for the horses," he remarked. "We'll tie the horses under that shed at the end."

"Might as well bring 'em in here," said Speedy.

"Nope," declared Tombstone. "Any time I sleep in a strange hayloft, I want my horse where I don't have to go through no doors to git him. I'm cautious."

"Also crazy," sighed Speedy. "Well, let's get set for the night."

CHAPTER II

Hot Money

THEY TOOK the canvas sack up into the hayloft, sat down, and dumped the contents on the floor. What little light came from the smoke-fogged lantern illuminated a pile of currency, sealed envelopes, sealed packages, and one small canvas sack, covered with seals. Tombstone poked at the pile with a forefinger, his eyes wide.

"All the money in the world," he whispered, "and here I set, hungry enough to lick the sweat off a caffay winder, and both boots full of water. I ort to be in a easy chair, sippin' me a drink."

"That stuff," declared Speedy soberly, "is penitentiary bait."

"Yuh mean—we've got to give it back?" asked Tombstone sadly. "Why, that feller told us to take it, Speedy. He didn't sound to me like a Injun-giver. He even said he'd see us later."

"That," declared Speedy, "is what annoys me."

They sat there for a long time, staring at the loot. The smoky, old lantern was almost dry, and was beginning to smell very bad. Finally Speedy said, "Tombstone, didja ever hear of a queer quirk of fate?"

"Quirk? Nope. Yuh don't meant quirt, do yuh? Yuh don't, huh? What does it mean?"

Speedy lifted his head quickly, listening closely. Then he took the lantern, gave it a quick jerk, extinguishing the flame, and put it aside. From outside came the sounds of hoofs, some inaudible conversation, and the stable door was flung open. A voice said:

"There's a lantern on a peg near the door."

A few moments later they could see a faint illumination through the opening at the ladder, and more conversation. Like two very silent-going snakes, Tombstone and Speedy wriggled over to the hole and peered down. The lantern didn't give much illumination, but they could see several men, all masked, and they seemed to be taking a man out of a huge grain-box. The man was not only tied and gagged, but he was blindfolded, too.

Swiftly they cut him loose and removed the gag and blindfold. He was able to sit up on the box, rubbing his sore face, massaging his wrists, while the men stood around him. Finally one of the men said hoarsely:

"Yore horse is tied to the fence out there near the gate. Do yuh know what I'm sayin' to yuh?"

The man nodded. The masked man said harshly:

"Don't ask questions. Get on yore horse and start goin'."

The ex-prisoner got unsteadily to his feet, flexed his legs painfully, and started for the doorway. He was not quite sure of his footing yet. One of the masked men, gun in hand, followed him. One of the other three laughed shortly, and said:

"Well, that's the deal, boys; so we might as well head for the ranch. I told yuh it would work out. Leave it to me and you'll all wear diamonds. C'mon. Better

put out that stinkin' lantern."

As the man picked up the lantern, Tombstone Jones said:

"Say, fellers, how far is it to Rawhide City?"

It was like dropping a bomb. For a moment all three men were frozen into immobility. Then the lantern went flying against the wall, a bullet smashed through a board about a foot from Speedy's face, and a moment later the men were out of the stable. Tombstone and Speedy rolled to the center of the loft.

"Of all the ravel-headed critters I ever seen!" Speedy said.

"Yeah, wasn't they?" queried Tombstone. "All I asked—"

"You didn't need to ask *them,*" said Speedy huskily.

"I'm tired of messin' around in the mud and rain. After all—"

"Listen, you long-geared idiot—them men were masked."

"Yeah, I noticed they was."

"Well, they wasn't on their way home from a masquerade ball. You shore put us in a warm spot."

Speedy snaked over to the hay-hole at the end of the loft. He didn't dare stick his head outside, but he heard some of the men talking earnestly. One man said:

"All right, we'll set the stable on fire—but how? Everythin' is so danged wet out here."

SPEEDY heard the one word, "hay," and went scuttling back to the ladder.

"What'd yuh hear?" Tombstone whispered hoarsely.

Speedy didn't say. He heard the door creak open, the sound of a boot-sole on the rough plank floor, and took a shot in that general direction. A man yelped painfully, banged into the door, and they heard him swearing bitterly.

"C'mon, we're safer downstairs!" Speedy whispered, and went down the ladder. Tombstone followed swiftly. Men were swearing outside in the rain.

Speedy said, "They want to set fire to this stable, but they ain't got nothin' dry enough to start it. That last feller came in to drop a match in the hay."

Speedy went over to the closed door, where he heard a man say:

"We can't do a thing, I tell yuh. Our best bet is to head for home."

"But them fellers in there heard too much."

"Mebbe not. We was masked, and that lantern didn't give much light. C'mon, there's no use standin' here in the rain."

The men moved away to their horses, but Speedy heard one say:

"Come daylight, we'll spot 'em all right."

"We're pullin' out right now," declared Speedy. "You shore put us in a pickle, Tombstone. Come daylight, they'll bushwhack us, if we stay here."

They sloshed out to their horses and rode away in the rain, back down the road they came over. They found Yolo, what there was of it, found the road north, and rode into Rawhide City about midnight. The stableman was asleep in the tack-room, so they put away their horses and headed for the hotel up the street. On a front window was painted, RAWHIDE REST HOTEL. A tall, angular, hard-faced woman was starting up the stairs with two buckets and a mop, but saw them and stopped.

"We'd like a nice, dry room, ma'am," said Speedy.

"Who wouldn't?" she snapped, and went on up the stairs.

"Well, wouldn't that make yuh wish yuh went to church?" asked Tombstone. Speedy said, "Prob'ly as true as gospel, at that."

An elderly man, tall and gaunt, came from a rear doorway, looked them over and asked:

"Did Emmy fix yuh up, boys?"

"If Emmy was the one with the mop and bucket—she didn't."

"Got a leak?" asked Speedy.

"Yea-a-ah!!" The man looked thoughtfully at the puddles around the feet of the two cowpunchers. They were really dripping.

"Yuh see, last spring we had a high wind, and it took a section of shingles

off the roof. I never got around to fixin' it."

"Are all the upstairs rooms leakin'?" asked Speedy.

"Averagin' pretty well, accordin' to Emmy. Git a later report in a few minutes, I reckon. Emmy is pretty accurate on details. Here she comes now."

The woman came down stairs, limping painfully, flung the mop toward the kitchen door, and said wearily;

"Put 'em in Number Seven, Al—it's the best of the lot. I got my dad-blamed feet tangled up in that mop, and almost broke my neck."

She went into the kitchen, kicking the mop aside. The man grinned and shook his head, as he opened the dog-eared register.

"Emmy," he said "don't know much about anatomy. Almost broke her neck! She looked like a ad for kidney pills. Heh, heh, heh! Sign yore alleged names right here and go up to Number Seven. Yuh don't need no key. Didja ever see such a rain in yore lives?"

While Speedy laboriously signed their names, Tombstone stood there, looking at the proprietor.

"Rain?" queried Tombstone. "You call *this* a rain? Where I come from we have fogs wetter than this. Why, one time I walked home at night in a rain. Had to cross the river on a long bridge. Awful dark that night. Well, sir, I never did cross that bridge, but I got home. I thought it was kinda funny—not findin' the bridge—but I found out next day that the bridge went out in the flood about a hour before I started home."

"Yuh mean yuh didn't know yuh waded the river and—yuh do?"

"Mister," nodded Tombstone soberly, "it rains where I come from."

THEY took their sodden war-sacks and went up to the room, where the woman had moved the bed and left two buckets to catch the leak water. They emptied their boots into the buckets, wrung out some of their clothes and emptied the buckets through a window.

"I parboiled a fish one time," remarked Speedy, "and he looked jist like you. Anyway, we're clean—if that's any advantege."

Tombstone sat down on the bed, wearing nothing but an expression of baffled amazement, staring at the wet clothes, the limp war-sacks. He made a few futile gestures and just sat there, slumped helplessly. Speedy turned from wringing out his socks into the bucket and saw the expression of Tombstone's face.

"What's eatin' you?" he asked curiously.

"We forgot it!" whispered Tombstone. "That sack of money! It's still up in that hay-loft."

Speedy stared at him, his jaw hanging loosely. Finally he said:

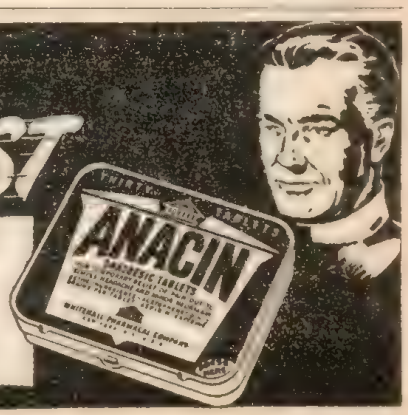
"You didn't put it in yore war-sack?"

"No, I—I shoved it under the hay. My gosh!" Tombstone reached for his wet underwear. "We've got to git back there and find it."

"Yuh knot-headed c h i c k a d e e—we couldn't find that place in the dark again!" argued Speedy. "Hang them drawers up and let's go to bed. Personally, I'd say we're better off without that money. It

[*Turn page*]

RELIEVES • HEADACHE
• NEURALGIA
• NEURITIS PAIN FAST



Here's Why...
Anacin® is like a doctor's prescription. That is, Anacin contains not one but a combination of medically proved active ingredients. Anacin is specially compounded to give FAST, LONG LASTING relief. Don't wait. Buy Anacin today.

ain't our money, after all. If we had it, somebody would prob'ly kill both of us to get it back."

"Yeah, I believe yuh're right, Speedy. If we ain't got it—and they kill us anyway—it'll be a mistake on their part, huh?"

"Yeah," agreed Speedy, "and it'll be somethin' that me and you will never get over."

It was noon next day when they awoke. It was still raining, and the catch-buckets were nearly filled. Their clothes were still soggy, but they had no others. Not having eaten since the day before, and that at breakfast time, they were famished. The hotel dining room was still open, and the elderly proprietor, whom the woman with the mop had called Al, was in the dining room when they sat down. Neither of them were in any mood for conversation, but the old man came over to them. "How'd yuh sleep?" he asked genially.

"Oh," replied Tombstone, "we jist shut both eyes—and there we are."

The old man chuckled. "Yuh're quite a josher. Huh! You must be about seven feet tall, ain't yuh?"

"Measurin' m' hat and boot-heels—about eight feet," replied Tombstone.

"Uh-hu-u-uh—that's right. My, my, you must have borned on a stretcher."

"I was borned on a Monday," corrected Tombstone. "And that re-mark was only funny the first time I heard it."

"I see. Hm-m-m-m. You got here about midnight, didn't yuh? Which way didja come in from?"

Speedy was quick on the trigger. "Rojo Springs," he said.

"Oh, yeah. Was it rainin' up there when yuh left?"

"No, it wasn't—but it shore rained later."

The waitress brought coffee and some cups. Tombstone said: "You wasn't interested in rain at Rojo Springs, was yuh?"

"Wasn't I? What makes yuh think I wasn't?"

"Jist what are you tryin' to find out about us?"

Al leaned back in his chair and looked gravely at Tombstone. "Well, it really ain't my business, but Luke Horne, the sheriff, asked me to find out a few things about you two. I try to oblige folks, yuh know."

"Since when," queried Speedy coldly, "has our comin' got anythin' to do with the law?"

"Don't harden up thataway," pleaded Al. "After all—well, you'll hear about it, anyway; so I might as well tell yuh that the train was robbed a couple miles out of Yolo last night. They shore got plenty money. Stuck up the depot agent and made him flag the train. He tried to break away and they killed him. New gang, I reckon."

AT THIS moment the waitress brought in their ham and eggs. After she went away Tombstone said, "What do yuh reckon became of the rest of our gang?"

"Yeah," nodded Speedy, "and who got the money?"

"Don't try to be funny," advised Al. "Did yuh ever know a feller named Johnny Briggs?"

Johnny Briggs was the man Keaton had named in his telegram, but the two cowboys merely shook their heads. Tombstone said:

"I used to know a feller named Oscar Briggs in Oklahomy, but his right name was Jim. They called him Oscar for short."

"He's in jail right now," said Al Benton, the hotel keeper.

"Oscar is?" blurted Tombstone. "Why, I heard that he died in—"

"I mean Johnny Briggs."

"Oh, that one. I thought for a minute—now what did Johnny Briggs do to git himself jailed?"

"He held up that train last night and shot the depot agent. Yuh see, Johnny got his hat knocked off in the depot, and they found the corpse a-layin' on it. It's got Johnny's name inside it."

"One man job, huh?" queried Tombstone.

"No, there was at least four men. Johnny's the only one they've located so far. Luke Horne and Windy Winters, his deputy, are out, tryin' to fill their hand."

"How much money did they get away with?" asked Speedy.

"Absolutely all there was in the safe."

"What a haul!" exclaimed Tombstone. "A job like that would put all of 'em on easy street. About a million apiece, huh? Or was it a small safe?"

"Are you dumb, or are yuh just actin'?" asked Al Benton soberly.

"What he knows about actin'," assured Speedy, "you can put in yore eye and never blink."

CHAPTER III

A Ride for Fun

A MAN and woman came into the dining room and sat down. Al Benton got up and went over there quickly, talked for a few minutes and came back.

"That's Mrs. Briggs," he told them quietly. "She's shore broke up about Johnny. The other one is Harry Drake, a lawyer. He took care of all the lawin' for Johnny's uncle, until he died."

"Lovely dove!" whispered Tombstone. "Yuh mean—he's dead?"

"Yeah, he got drug by a horse and got his neck broke."

"He don't show any scars," remarked Tombstone soberly.

Al Benton looked at Speedy and shook his head slowly.

"Yuh say he ain't actin', Smith?" he asked.

"No—no, he don't even know how to act."

"Well, I'll see yuh later, boys."

Al Benton left them and went back to the lobby. Tombstone looked back at the table near the doorway and remarked that Mrs. Briggs was mighty pretty, but he didn't like lawyers, especially one who had a turkey-neck and was almost bald. Speedy said, "Yuh can't look at a man and tell how smart he is."

"That's shore true," admitted Tombstone. "You take me for example."

"What kind of a example?" asked Speedy, finishing his coffee.

"Well, jist for instance, I can make folks think I'm dumb."

"In yore case, it ain't no art, cowboy," sighed Speedy. "The telegram said to see John Briggs without fail."

"Yeah, that's right, ain't it? We better foller orders."

"Not a chance, my boy. Johnny Briggs had a gang—remember. The less me and you see of Johnny Briggs, the better we're off. That blasted sheriff is tryin' to pick up some more suspects, and we're two more that might fill up his jail. No, we'll find out more about this deal, before we obey any orders."

"Suits me," nodded Tombstone. "I don't hanker for trouble."

Al Benton left the hotel and went down to the sheriff's office where he found Luke Horne, the sheriff, and Windy Winters, the deputy, cursing the weather. Luke Horne was a huge man, with a mop of black hair, lantern jaw, and a very good command of profanity. Windy was small, thin, with big, flaring ears and a wide mouth. Windy was also blond and very sallow.

"You can forget them two strangers, Luke," declared Benton. "The only reason they came in out of the rain last night was because this was the end of the road."

"Dumb, eh?" remarked Windy wearily.

"Prob'ly the worst that ever hit Rawhide City."

"I didn't figure the job was done by strangers," said Luke.

"How does Johnny feel about it?" asked Benton.

Windy chuckled and the sheriff looked at him sharply.

"Johnny," chuckled Windy, "feels toward us like you feel toward them two strangers. He said that Luke might not be the dumbest person on earth, but—"

"That's enough," interrupted Luke. "What he thinks don't bother me."

"No, but he offered to prove it," choked Windy.

"He can't prove anythin'," declared the sheriff. "We've got him where the hair is short, and he better start tryin' to prove that he didn't help stick up that train. I hate to do this, on account of his wife, but law is law."

"She was up at the dinin' room with Harry Drake," said Benton.

"Gone from bad to worse, eh?" remarked Windy. "That scorpion!"

"Drake is a good, reputable lawyer," said the sheriff.

"I don't like him, Luke. And if you think you can prove anythin' to me about Harry Drake—go ahead. Oh, I know, he was Hank Buck's lawyer. Smart as a whip, Buck allus said. A busted whip, if yuh ask me. Why didn't he have Buck make out a will, I'll ask yuh. Don't answer, because you don't know why. Hank Buck loved Johnny Briggs, and he hated Sam Mitchell. Then he gits himself killed—without no will. Everybody knows that he intended for Johnny to have the HB spread. Now, that half-witted Sam Mitchell, bein' another nephew, sues for half of the HB. And another thing, that Harry Drake is *his* lawyer."

SLOWLY the sheriff shook his head.

"Hank Buck wasn't expectin' to die," said Luke. "Lotsa men don't make out a will."

"Didn't expect to die, huh? Bullet-proof, snag-proof, antiseptic and germ-proof, eh? Didn't the old pelicano realize that *everybody* has got to die sometime? Hank wasn't young. Dumb, I call it."

"Have you got a will made out?" asked Benton soberly.

"I shore have—a vocal one. I told Luke that if I died before him, which I doubt, he can have my gun and my spurs. They can bury me in the rest of my leavin's."

"Why do yuh doubt?" queried Luke seriously.

"Well, I dunno, Luke. Yuh're the picture of health—on the outside—but I've jist got me a hunch that inside—well, yuh're what they call a holler shell. You git mad to easy. Yore face gits red. All points to a sudden de-mise. Are yuh feelin' all right, Lukie?"

Luke told him in plain profanity just where he could go. Windy shrugged his thin shoulders and said quietly:

"Yuh see what I mean, Al? No self control at all. Burnin' himself up inside."

Windy walked over to the doorway and glanced up the sidewalk.

"Oh-oh!" he grunted. "Here comes the lodge-poles."

"I'm goin' back to the hotel," said Benton quickly. "See yuh later, gents."

As Benton went out, Luke said, "Let *them* do the talkin', Windy."

Tombstone ducked his head and came in, looking them over soberly. Speedy peered past Tombstone, flipped some water off the brim of his hat and said:

"Howdy, officers. We jist dropped in to pass the time of day."

"And," added Tombstone, "to find out if you've caught any more train robbers. Real interestin' case, seems to me. They tell me that one man forgot his hat. Funny thing—forgettin' a hat, when it's rainin', especially when he had his name in it. Pretty dumb, don'tcha think, sheriff?"

The sheriff didn't say. Windy said quietly: "Go ahead—you interest me strangely."

"Have yuh reconstructed the case?" asked Tombstone.

"Have we what?" asked the sheriff curiously.

"It's what a detective allus does," explained Tombstone. "Yuh go out, pull the same kind of a deal, and then figure where you'd go. They say it works out, too. Like a man stealin' a horse from a hitchrack. You don't know which way he went. So you steal one, too, and try to figure where you'd go, so they can't find yuh."

"And what usually happens to yuh?" asked Windy.

"Well, sometimes you ain't as smart as the thief was, and they hang yuh for horse-stealin'."

"Scientific, huh? And what do you two know about detectin'?"

"That's our business," replied Tombstone soberly.

"Well, what do yuh know about that, Luke?" gasped Windy.

"For once in his life, Al Benton was right," replied the sheriff. "You said yuh came here to pass the time of day, didn't yuh? Well, you may consider it passed."

"Then you don't want our help, huh?"

"Lookin' at it from our angle—no," replied the sheriff.

"Well," sighed Tombstone, "we might as well leave them to their sad fate, Speedy. After all, you've allus said, 'Never cast pearls before swine.' Good day, gentlemen."

They filed outside and went back up the street. Speedy said:

"Where'd you git that pearls before swine idea?"

"I got it out of m' own head, Speedy—I think. Pretty good, eh?"

BACK in the sheriff's office, Luke Horne was glaring at Windy, who seemed to be having some sort of convulsions.

"Pearls before swine!" choked Windy. "Mamma mine!"

"Stop it! You don't even know what he meant."

"I don't need to. That word *pig* was enough for me."

"Yuh're as dumb as they are, Windy."

"Don't try to soft-soap me, Luke—it won't do yuh any good."

The rain ceased about two o'clock that afternoon. Tombstone had been asking Al Benton a lot of questions about the different spreads, and he found out that the Circle D seemed to cover a lot of territory north of Yolo, and was owned by a man known as "Butch" Duncan, so nicknamed because he had, at one time, operated a butcher business. He bought the ranch from the bank, which had foreclosed a mortgage.

"There's an old ranchhouse north of Yolo," remarked Tombstone, "but nobody lives there."

"That's the old JK," said Benton. "It's part of the Circle D. Ain't nobody lived there for—" Benton hesitated, looking curiously at Tombstone. "Wait a minute. You're strangers here—and you came here by way of Rojo Springs; so how would you know—"

"I told yuh I was right, Speedy!" exclaimed Tombstone. "I told yuh didn't I?"

"Yeah, you did," admitted Speedy easily, although he hadn't the slightest idea what Tombstone was talking about. Benton waited for an explanation. Tombstone rolled and lighted a cigarette, a grin on his lean face.

"Yessir, I knowed I was right. Why, I can even tell yuh jist what the place looks like. Some day I'm goin' in for tellin' fortunes."

"What's this all about," asked Benton curiously.

"I dreamed about that place," replied Tombstone. "I saw it jist as plain. I told Speedy about it this mornin', and he didn't believe it. Mister Benton, I'm a man with a strange power."

"He's right," added Speedy soberly. "At times the man amazes me. He foretells things, I tell yuh. He gits up in the mornin' and he'll say, 'Speedy, today at eleven o'clock we'll meet a man on a gray horse.' Well, sir, you can set yore watch by it. I dunno," Speedy shook his head, "it's got me beat."

"Yeah," agreed Benton, "I've heard of folks like that. Well, I've got to get back to work."

"Just for fun," suggested Tombstone, "let's ride down there and prove it to ourselves."

"All right," agreed Speedy. "I think the rain is over."

As they crossed the muddy street, on their way to the stable, Tombstone said:

"When did we meet a man on a gray horse at eleven o'clock?"

"Listen, you knot-head," replied Speedy, "I had to add to yore lie, didn't I? He had yuh where the hair was short. About one more grunt out of you, and we'd have had the sheriff on our trail. You lied yore way out of it this time, but you won't always be able to think of a

good lie every time."

"I'll be thirty-somethin' on m' next birthday, and I ain't failed yet," declared Tombstone. "What'sa idea of goin' down to that old ranch, anyway, Speedy?"

"Whose idea was it?" asked Speedy. "You said that jist for fun we'd ride down there."

"Oh, yeah—I forgot. Well, I'll go with yuh, if yore mind is set on it, Speedy. Yuh're just like a little kid. You git an idea and yuh won't be happy until you've done it."

They rode out of Rawhide City and headed down the muddy road to Yolo. Tombstone said, "If it rains again and we get wet, I'll never forgive yuh. My underwear is just gettin' dry."

"Yore father," said Speedy, "was either a awful tender-hearted person, or just plumb negligent."

"Meanin' what?" asked Tombstone.

"Well, he let you live and grow up to what yuh are now."

"I'll think that re-mark over, and give yuh my answer later."

AFTER several miles Tombstone drew up his horse and pointed at an old trail. "Yuh know somethin', Speedy; I'll betcha that trail leads over to the old JK ranchhouse. We don't have to ride down to Yolo."

"Suits me," said Speedy. "You do the navigatin'."

They followed the old trail for about two miles through the brushy hills, when they suddenly almost ran into a man with a pack horse. He was just off the trail, working on a pack. His saddlehorse was a few feet away, watching them. The man, a short, heavy-set person, was busily engaged in unpacking what looked like a big bundle of cowhides. In fact, he was too busy to realize that the two cowboys were there with him, until his horse nickered softly.

The man whirled like a flash and reached for his gun. Almost at that same instant Speedy fired, and the man jerked sideways, his gun flying from his hand. His eyes had snapped wide at sight of them, but they were narrowed now, as he cursed bitterly.

Tombstone dismounted quickly, walked over and picked up the man's gun, and almost fell into an old prospector's shaft, so grown up with brush that it was invisible six feet away. The man eyed Tombstone venomously, but continued to rub his numbed hand and wrist.

"Funny deal," remarked Tombstone. "Was you aimin' to dump them hides into that hole? Yeah, I reckon yuh was. Don'tcha realize that hides are worth money? Jist wasteful, huh?"

"Think yuh're funny, don'tcha?" snarled the man. "Mind yore own business, and you'll live longer."

"We ort to take him down and pull his fangs," suggested Speedy. "I remember that he was goin' to strike without rattlin'. What'll we do with him for his misdeeds?"

Tombstone grinned slowly, and pointed down the hill.

"See that old cottonwood down there? Must be half-mile or more. We're goin' to give yuh ten seconds to git out of range, and we'll time yuh to that tree. No yuh don't," added Tombstone, as the man looked over at his horse. "Yuh're goin' to paddle down there on yore own feet. Speedy, you start countin' ten."

Speedy flexed his wrist, cocked his gun and said, "One—two—"

He didn't need to count any more, because the man was galloping straight down that hill, crashing brush, disappearing momentarily, but bouncing back in sight, as he headed for the old cottonwood. Speedy holstered his gun and looked thoughtfully at Tombstone.

"Why'd we do that?" he asked.

Tombstone removed his hat and scratched his head thoughtfully.

"Search me," he replied. "It was yore idea."

"It was not! You showed him the tree—and you said—"

"We'll share the blame—how'd that be? You done the countin'. By the way, yuh're gettin' awful fancy with that gun, seems t' me."

"If you mean shootin' that gun out of his hand, Mr. Jones, yuh're all wrong; I shot at his shoulder."

"Well, at least yuh're honest, my boy. Suppose we take a look at this here bundle of hides."

CHAPTER IV

Fight Near the Line House

PULLING out his knife, Tombstone slashed the binding rope and pulled the hides apart. They were fairly fresh hides, and the brands showed eight Box B brands, and six branded with the HB mark.

"Seems to me," remarked Speedy, "that the HB spread is the one Johnny Briggs was supposed to inherit, and the Box B is the brand Johnny Briggs has for his little ranch that his uncle gave him. I think that's what Al Benton said."

"And now that we have unraveled the mystery," said Tombstone, "what'll we do with it?"

Speedy was very thoughtful, studying the hides. He looked up at Tombstone and said, "These hides are off stolen cows, Tombstone."

"Can yuh tell by lookin' at 'em?"

"Why else would any cowman dump good hides into a hole in the ground? Of all the dumb critters on earth, we're the worst! We had a cattle rustler right in our clutches, caught with the goods—and you wanted to see how fast he could run. He knows that we've done exposed his basket of tricks, and he knows who we are."

"Now," said Tombstone soberly, "it's our brains agin his."

"Yea-a-a-ah!" breathed Speedy, "And I don't like the odds."

"Well, there's no use hangin' around here; he ain't comin' back."

"And he ain't goin' ridin', neither," declared Speedy, as he proceeded to unsaddle the two horses, tossed the saddles aside and sent the two horses galloping down the muddy trail.

They rode on for about two miles, but there was no sign of the old stable and ranchhouse. They were about to turn back, when Tombstone discovered an old line-shack in the brush, down in a swale, where only the roof and the stove-pipe were visible. They swung down the slope and pulled up in front of the old shack. The old door hung partly open and the one window had long since been smashed out. Speedy said, "Ain't been anybody here since the Civil War."

From inside the shack came a voice, pain-racked, shrill:

"It's about time you fellers got here! Leavin' me here to die like this—you danged savages! Didja bring somethin' to—"

A thumping sound and a bitter curse against the pain. Then a man came out, inching along on his left leg and hip, both arms trying to pull him along. He looked like a wild-man, his face dirty, hair over his eyes, as he paused there, staring at them, realizing that they were not the men he was expecting. Then he slumped forward on his face.

Tombstone and Speedy got off their horses quickly, and were half-way over to the man, when a bullet sung past them and smashed into the wall of the shack. As they whirled around another bullet whacked viciously into the old door, sending a shower of splinters into the air. Two men on horses, about a hundred and fifty yards away, were shooting at them with rifles.

Speedy made a flying mount on his whirling horse, just as Tombstone went down flat on his back, almost against his horse, which whirled aside. Tombstone yelped:

"They got me, Speedy! Go on and save yourself—don't bother with me, I've been cut down!"

Speedy whirled back and sent two shots toward the two men, who separated quickly and dismounted. Speedy dived off his mount, got Tombstone by the shoulders and helped him to his feet.

"I think I'm done for!" panted Tomb-

stone. "Save yourself!"

Speedy swung Tombstone's horse between them and the shooters, and helped Tombstone mount. A bullet creased the top of the cantle on the saddle, but Tombstone made it. A moment later Speedy was on his horse, driving Tombstone's horse ahead of him into the brush. A few moments later they were back on the trail, traveling fast. Bullets had cut the brush-tops around them, as they went away, but they were paying no attention.

A MILE from the shack they pulled up. Speedy said:

"Where did they get yuh, pardner?"

"I—I don't honestly know," faltered Tombstone. "In fact, I hate to look at m'self. I must be hit awful hard, wherever it is. They say that when yuh're hit fatally, yuh don't feel nothin' but numbness."

"Yuh don't show any blood," said Speedy.

"Prob'ly bleedin' inside, Speedy."

Speedy got off his horse and went close to Tombstone, looking up at him, a puzzled expression on his lean face. There was no blood on Tombstone's head nor face, no blood on his shirt. His gaze traveled the length of Tombstone, and his eyes centered on his right boot. Embedded in his high heel was a soft-nosed bullet, part of it still exposed. Then he slowly lifted his eyes and looked at Tombstone's face, dirty-gray, very serious for once in his life.

"They shore cut me down in m' youth," he said slowly. "Do yuh think I'll be able to make it to a doctor?"

"Yeah, you'll make it," replied Speedy, "and after he looks yuh over, he'll send yuh to a boot-maker. You ain't hurt, Jug-Head! That bullet hit you in the heel and knocked your feet loose. Let's get goin'."

They got back to Rawhide City at dark, stabled their horses and went to the hotel. Windy Winters, the deputy, was in the little lobby. He was curious as to where they had been, but they told him nothing. He went to the dining room with them, and the three of them sat down at a table together. Harry Drake, the lawyer, came in with a big, hulking cowboy, and sat down at the other end of the room. Windy said, "That's Butch Duncan with Drake. Butch has the Circle D. I've got a hunch that Drake owns some of it."

"What gives yuh that hunch?" asked Speedy.

"I dunno. Maybe Drake jist gives him advice—I dunno. Say, I've got to ride out to Johnny Briggs' place after supper and pick up some clean clothes for him. Want to ride out with me?"

"Shore," nodded Tombstone.

They were eating their supper when another man came in. He was intoxicated, and seemed just a bit belligerent, as he weaved his way to Drake's table, bumped into Drake's chair and said:

"The boys have been lookin' for you, Butch."

"Get out of here, you drunken fool," snarled Butch.

"Zasso?" queried the man, rocking on his heels. "Izzatso? Huh!"

"That's Sam Mitchell," whispered Windy. "He's the other nephew that's suing for half of the HB spread."

Drake was talking earnestly to Mitchell, who didn't seem interested. He waved Drake's argument aside and said loudly:

"You give me ten dollars."

Drake protested, but Mitchell was insistent.

"I'm not stayin' out at the Circle D any longer," he said. "Don't like the 'sociation I have to keep. I'm gentleman. Give me ten dollars, so I can get room here. Don't argue with me—give me the money."

"*He's* a gentleman!" whispered Windy. "If yuh ask me, he's a hound pup which is so ornery that he can't even get fleas."

Drake, to save any further argument, gave him the money, and he went out, weaving past the empty tables. Speedy said, "Why did Drake have to give him ten dollars, Windy?"

"To make him shut up, I reckon. Sam is plenty ornery, but he ain't got the nerve of a pet chicken."

After a few minutes Butch Duncan went out, leaving Drake at the table. Tombstone, Speedy and Windy finished their supper and went down to the office. Windy went back to Johnny Briggs' cell and talked with him about what clothes to bring back from the ranch.

IT WAS very dark and with a stiff breeze blowing, when they left town. As they rode along Windy said:

"You fellers have kinda got folks around here guessin'."

"Guessin' what?" asked Speedy.

"Guessin' what yuh're doin' down here —especially Luke Horne. He wanted me to find out where you fellers went this afternoon."

"Well, you can tell him that we went ridin'," said Tombstone. "You can tell him we found a man tryin' to dump a bunch of hides into a mine shaft, and we found a wounded man in an old shack in the hills. We might have been able to tell yuh more about him, but two dry-gulchers tried to hand us each a harp—so we pulled out."

They rode on for some time, before Windy said:

"Yuh know, it's just possible that Luke is right. I don't say flatly that he is—but it's possible."

"What did Luke say?" asked Speedy.

"He said he thought you two were the fastest liars he ever heard."

"Well, that's nice," remarked Tombstone soberly. "Yuh see, Windy, we ain't never tried to see how *fast* we could lie."

"Well, why do yuh tell *me* things like that, Tombstone?" asked Windy. "After all, I can swaller the truth once in a while."

"Would you recognize the truth, if yuh heard it?" asked Speedy.

"Try it on me," said Windy.

"We're detectives, workin' for the Cattlemen's Association, Windy."

"Yuh're—wait a minute, Speedy! Can't-cha start on somethin' more simple than that, and kinda work up to it?"

"Now that yuh understand who we

[Turn page]

A DIME BUYS A DOLLAR'S WORTH OF SHAVING PLEASURE!

ONLY 10¢ A PACKAGE

ALSO IN HANDY DISPENSER 10 for 30¢

BLUE STAR Blades are Sharper, Longer-Lasting because they are ground and honed in oil.

No other blade gives you so much for so little! Try a Blue Star Blade on hard-to-shave spots. See how smoothly, easily it takes off the toughest whiskers. For better shaving at a real saving, get Blue Star Blades today.

Blue STAR
SINGLE EDGE RAZOR BLADES

PRECISION ASR PRODUCTS

AMERICAN SAFETY RAZOR CORP., BROOKLYN 1, N.Y.

are," said Tombstone, "things will be easier to explain."

"What things?" asked Windy. "Don't answer that, Tombstone. You must think I'm dumb."

"Have it yore own way, Windy," sighed Tombstone.

They rode in at the Box B ranch. Johnny Briggs' ranchhouse was small, almost hidden in the trees, which lined the short drive from the main road. They were still a hundred feet from the house, when a rider came galloping in behind them. Swiftly Tombstone led the way off the road, just before the rider went past them, and drew up sharply at the front porch. Because of the trees and the darkness they were unable to see who he was. Windy said:

"Why dodge him? You'd almost think—"

From beyond them a voice yelled shrilly:

"No, no, you blasted fool! Don't—"

At that moment an explosion lighted up the place, and all sorts of debris came slashing through the brush and trees, while more of it rained down. The frightened horses banged into each other, and almost unseated the three riders, before they got them under control. Windy was wheezing, "What happened? What happened? That wasn't any gun that went off!

They spurred back onto the road. Fire had started in the small ranchhouse. They spurred ahead, and stopped at the house. The whole front of it had been blown away. Twenty feet from the porch was a dead saddle-horse, all four legs in the air, and the air reeked of dynamite. There was no sign of the man who had ridden the horse.

"Good gosh!" gasped Windy. "Molly Briggs was in that house! She must have been killed! Do somethin', will yuh? Don't jist set there!"

"Yuh're still a-settin' there," reminded Speedy. "Looks to me as though that's all we can do right now."

"Somebody yelled at that feller who went past us," said Tombstone. "That must be his horse out there. Maybe he ain't come down yet."

They dismounted and managed to search what was left of the house, but there was no sign of anybody. All the windows and doors had been blown away, and the flames were swiftly obliterating the rest of it.

"That yell," declared Tombstone, "sounded like it came from that direction —the stable. Let's look down there."

THEY flung the big door open and went inside, lighting matches. Molly Briggs was sitting on the floor, her back against the wall, tied hand and foot. Windy untied her, while the others lighted matches, and they took her outside. She was crying, but unhurt. Windy said:

"Molly, what on earth happened? Who done this to you?"

"I don't know," she said weakly. "Just a little while ago, they came. They had masks on. They said I wouldn't be hurt if I didn't make trouble. I—I don't know who they were, Windy. I heard them saying something about 'getting' somebody when they opened the front door, but I don't know who they meant. They were outside and I heard one of them yelling for somebody to stop. Then I heard the explosion."

"They didn't say who they were goin' to get, eh?" remarked Windy.

"No, they didn't say who it was. After the explosion I heard one of them say, 'Let's get out of here fast,' and I heard them riding away. They—they ruined our ranchhouse, didn't they?"

"Yeah," replied Windy. "There ain't much left, Molly. We'll get you to town. My bronc will pack double."

Tombstone walked up, lighted a match and examined the dead horse. As the four of them rode away Tombstone said, "Windy, who rides a sorrel with three white feet and a Circle Seven brand on the left hip?"

"Sam Mitchell," he replied quickly. "Was that—I see what yuh mean."

"What about Sam Mitchell?" asked Molly.

"Would he come out to see yuh, Molly?" asked Windy.

"I told him," replied Molly seriously, "that if he ever came out again, when Johnny wasn't here, I'd slam the door in his face."

"Well, *you* didn't," remarked Tombstone, "but somebody shore did, ma'am."

CHAPTER V

Valise Full of Money

LEAVING the ranch they took Molly Briggs to the hotel, and then went on to the office, where they found Luke Horne, talking with Harry Drake. Windy blurted out the whole story in a few words, while the sheriff and lawyer listened in amazement. Drake said, "My gosh! You think Sam Mitchell was killed?"

"His horse was," replied Windy, "and we couldn't find Sam."

"Get my horse!" snapped the sheriff. "Tell the coroner. Pick up some of the boys. We've got to get out there fast."

Tombstone and Speedy didn't ride back with them, nor were they invited. In their hotel room they talked things over, and Speedy insisted that someone had fixed the front door of that ranchhouse with a dynamite bomb—fixed it for him and Tombstone.

"Yuh're crazy," insisted Tombstone. "How'd they know we was comin' out there with Windy?"

"You've got a point there," admitted Speedy, "but I'll bet I'll bust it off. Somebody knew. It's a cinch they didn't intend to blow Sam Mitchell to glory, because they yelled at him. And why would they want to dynamite Windy? No, I tell yuh, we know too much."

"Intelligent, huh?"

"Very little, if any," sighed Speedy. "If we had any brains, we'd pull out. When they start dynamitin', I get goose-pimples."

It was nearly two hours later, when Luke Horne knocked on their door, announced his name and was invited in. The big sheriff was very grim and determined. He said:

"We found what was left of Sam Mitchell."

"How far did it heave him?" asked Tombstone.

"Half-way down to the corral."

The sheriff settled himself in their one chair, and looked them over coldly. Speedy said, "Got somethin' on yore mind?"

"Plenty. And I want straight answers. Windy told me that you said you found a man dumpin' green cow-hides in a prospect shaft today. He said that you said you found a wounded man in a line-shack in the hills, and two men tried to cut yuh down with rifles."

Tombstone pulled off his boot and handed it to the sheriff, pointing out the bullet in his heel. "They shot low," he remarked dryly.

The sheriff nodded and handed the boot back to him.

"The whole thing sounds like you made it up," he said.

"Eight hides had been yanked off Box B cows, and six of 'em off JB cows," enumerated Tombstone.

"What about the man who was dumpin' 'em?"

"Oh, we chased him down the hill," grinned Tombstone. "My, my, how he could run!"

"I'd imagine so," remarked the sheriff. It was evident that he was taking all this with the proverbial grain of salt.

"Who," asked Speedy, "knew that me and Tombstone were goin' out to Johnny Briggs' ranch with Windy tonight?"

"Who?" Luke looked thoughtfully at them. "Nobody, except me and Windy."

"Which one of yuh set that bomb at the front door?"

"Yuh're crazy, Smith."

"Then start thinkin', Sheriff. It's a cinch it wasn't set to kill Sam Mitchell, 'cause they yelled at him."

"You don't mean to say that somebody wanted to kill you two."

"Think hard," advised Speedy soberly. "I told yuh—wait! Harry Drake, the

lawyer, was in the office with me, talkin' about the inheritance case when Windy came from the jail and said he'd have to go out to Johnny's ranch and get some clean shirts for Johnny. You two rode in about that time, and Windy said he'd ask yuh if yuh didn't want to ride out with him. Windy hates to ride alone at night. Spooky, I reckon."

"So Harry Drake knew it, eh?" remarked Tombstone. "Who else?"

"Harry is the only one who could know about it—and he's no dynamiter. After all, what would anybody want to murder you two for? It don't make sense. Nobody around here knows you two."

"Don't forget," said Speedy, "we found a man buryin' hides, and we found a wounded man in a shack."

"If you ain't lyin'," amended the sheriff, gettin to his feet.

"I'm goin' to have a talk with Molly Briggs, and hear what she has to say about it. I'll talk with you two later."

AFTER the sheriff left the room, Tombstone said complainingly:

"I hate and de-spise a liar, and he thinks I'm one."

"Well, dry yore tears," advised Speedy. "After all, what he thinks don't hurt us none. Let's go downstairs and see what folks are all talkin' about."

"And somebody'll take a shot at us."

"I don't think so; they're too busy cussin' each other for makin' a mistake tonight. C'mon."

They went downstairs into the lobby, but there was no one in sight. They went out on the long porch and stood in the heavy shadows. After a few moments they saw a man step off the street quickly and move into the heavy shadows, too. They couldn't see him now. Speedy whispered, "It shore looks like dirty work at the cross-roads."

"Do yuh think he's waitin' for us?" asked Tombstone in a whisper.

"Waitin' for somebody. Sh-h-h-h!"

A man came down the sidewalk, stopped and looked around. There was enough light for them to see him, but not to recognize him. Then he turned in toward the hotel, only to stop abruptly, when the man confronted him in the shadows. They were unable to hear what was said, until a voice said plainly:

"Yuh're goin' to do exactly what I tell yuh to do. I'm pullin' out of this deal, and I'm goin' out heeled. Start walkin'."

The two men moved away back to the sidewalk, headed down the street, with Tombstone and Speedy going quickly to the sidewalk. The two men crossed the street away from the lights, and entered a doorway.

"Drake's office is over there," whispered Speedy. "Let's go look."

"Did you get a good look at the first feller?" asked Tombstone.

"Looked big," replied Speedy. "Said he was goin' away heeled."

The curtains were down, but they could see a light in the office.

"If that was Drake," whispered Tombstone, "he didn't come here because he wanted to. You watch the front door. I think there's another door into the alley."

Tombstone went into the alley, where it was so dark that he had to feel along the wall of the building, but he found the other door. He put his ear against it, but was unable to hear anything, until footsteps came across the floor, and he heard a latch rattle. Tombstone, flat against the wall, using the dim light from the street to show him the silhouette of a man, who stepped outside, turned and started to carefully close the door, when Tombstone's gun barrel thudded against his head. Something fell into the street away from the falling man, and Tombstone picked it up. It was a small valise, but very heavy.

"Prob'ly illegal," remarked Tombstone aloud, "but yuh can't take chances."

He came out of the alley, called quietly to Speedy, and they went back across the street. No one had seen them. Speedy didn't ask any questions, as they went down an alley, made their way over the usual back-yard debris and reached the back stairs of the hotel.

Up in their room Speedy looked in-

quiringly at Tombstone, who placed the heavy valise on the table.

"Where'd yuh get that?" asked Speedy.

"A feller came out the side door, and I patted him on the head."

The valise was not locked, and in it were bales of currency, some gold, and a huge bundle of papers, held together with a wide, elastic band. They stood there and looked at each other.

"For poor men," remarked Speedy, "we get our hands on more darned money!"

"Let's try to figure this out," said Tombstone. "As far as I can figure, this feller was taking' the money away from Drake. Is that yore conclusion?"

SPEEDY didn't reply—he was looking at the papers, the rubber band dangling from his fingers.

"Them things are no good, Speedy," Tombstone said. "Let's concentrate on money."

"Wait a minute," whispered Speedy. "Here's Hank Buck's will—and they said he didn't leave any will."

"More lies, huh?" queried Tombstone. "Now, about the money—"

Someone knocked on the door, and Tombstone swept money and papers into the bag. He shoved it under the bed and called:

"Who is it?"

"Luke Horne."

Speedy opened the door and let the sheriff in.

"I've had a long talk with Molly Briggs," Horne said. "She says them fellers grabbed her, left her in the stable, and it wasn't but a few minutes until she heard the explosion."

"What does that mean?" asked Speedy.

"I don't know," admitted the sheriff. He stooped down and picked up a paper. He started to put it on the table, but hesitated, reading the print on the cover.

Speedy groaned internally. It was Hank Buck's will, which Tombstone had knocked on the floor, when he scooped up the other stuff.

"I dunno what that is," said Speedy. "We picked it up on the hotel porch today. What is it?"

The big sheriff looked at them for several moments, before he said slowly:

"This is Hank Buck's will. Harry Drake said he never made out any will. This paper," Luke banged it on the table, "leaves all of the HB spread to Johnny Briggs."

"Well, good for Johnny!" exclaimed Tombstone.

"But who dropped it on the porch?" asked the sheriff. "That's a funny place to find it—if yuh ask me."

"Leaves it all to Johnny Briggs, eh?" remarked Speedy. "Ain't it funny, sheriff? I mean, Sam Mitchell relinquishin' any claim he may have had on the HB, and now we find the will. This'll fix Johnny up fine. We ain't never met the gent, but he's got a mighty pretty woman."

"Fixes him up as far as the inheritance goes, but he's still stuck with that train robbery."

"Yeah." Tombstone nodded. "That's right. But maybe his luck will hold out, Sheriff."

"He'll need more than luck to dodge that charge."

"Any man," said Speedy, "who is so dumb that he shoots a man and leaves his own hat under the body—well, he's too dumb to be at large, I'd say. It was rainin', too, and he needed a hat."

The sheriff stared at Tombstone for several moments, looking the tall cowpuncher over carefully. Then he said:

"For once in yore life, High Pockets, tell me the truth, will yuh? What are you two doin' here in Rawhide City?"

"We're detectives," said Tombstone in a hoarse whisper.

Luke Horne snorted his disgust and turned toward the door, when footsteps came pounding down the hallway, came to a stop at their door, and Windy's voice yelled;

"Is Luke Horne in there?"

Luke opened the door and Windy stumbled in, puffing heavily.

"Al said you might be here," he panted. "Some of the boys heard a commotion in Harry Drake's office, and we busted in.

Harry had been batted over the head and tied up. His safe is empty, too. He's been robbed! He can't tell us a blamed thing, except that several men jumped him—all masked."

Luke Horne looked sharply at Tombstone and Speedy and said:

"It's shore lucky for you two that I know yuh was up here all the time. C'mon, Windy."

CHAPTER VI

Missing Will

WHEN the door closed, Tombstone smiled weakly at Speedy and they both looked toward the bed. Speedy drew a deep breath and shook his head.

"If he'd ever found that valise, we'd be in jail right now."

"That big, lyin' lawyer!" exclaimed Tombstone. "Several men—all masked! I hate a liar above all critters. Yuh know, I'm about to set down and figure this thing out, Speedy."

"Don't cover too much territory," said Speedy. "Just start in by figurin' out how to keep us from goin' to jail for robbery."

"Yeah, I'll include that as I go along," replied Tombstone. "How much money do yuh reckon is in that valise?"

"Enough to send us both up for twenty years apiece."

"That much? Huh! Well, it goes to prove what I've allus said."

"What have you allus said?"

"Crime don't pay. Honesty is the best policy—and a lie is a abomination."

"Stick to the first two," said Speedy dryly, "but don't bear down too heavy on the last one—we might have to use some of it."

"Yeah, that's right. Yuh know, I've got me a idea."

Tombstone got the valise from under the bed, dumped the contents into his war-bag, and walked over to the front window. He shoved the window up, peered out into the darkness, and flung the bag far out into the muddy street, where it landed with an audible thud.

"There," he said, closing the window, "let 'em find out where that came from. At least, we ain't got it."

Speedy took off his boots and sat there, wiggling his toes.

"You didn't say whether I was smart in doin' that or not," reminded Tombstone. Speedy didn't say what he thought.

"Anyway," said Tombstone thoughtfully, "they can't send us to jail for stealin' the valise."

"That sums it up pretty good, I believe," said Speedy. "We might as well go to bed and give our brains some rest."

Tombstone started to take off his boots, when someone knocked on the door, and a muffled voice said, "This is Luke Horne."

"Again!" groaned Tombstone. "C'mon in, Luke."

But this time it wasn't the sheriff—it was three masked men, backed up by three guns. They came in swiftly and closed the door.

"Keep yore hands in sight," warned one of them. "If it wasn't that we need to know things, we'd blast yuh down right here. Rope their hands—tight."

Two of the men worked swiftly, roping their wrists, while the other watched closely. He warned, "One peep out of you, and yuh're loaded with lead."

"Yeah, and you never find out what yuh want to know," added Speedy. "Dead men tell no tales."

"Nor lies, either," snarled the man. "All right, we're pullin' out. One false move—and you're dead."

They eased out into the hallway and went down to the rear stairs, where a man met them. He was panting a little.

"We've got to pull out fast," he said. "I had to stick up Benton—up at the top, of the stairs, and he recognized my voice."

"Why didn't yuh knock him down?"

"Never thought of it. Anyway, Al's all right—just nosey."

"Just nosey, eh? Get 'em into that wagon box—*pronto!* That old fool will

yelp his head off. One of yuh drive, and the other set in the wagon-box with 'em to see that they stay put. We'll wait a few minutes and then foller yuh. Get goin'."

The team and wagon pulled out of Rawhide City, and Tombstone and Speedy stretched out in the wagon-box, feet to the front, their heads almost in contact with the end-gate. One man drove, while the other crouched back of the seat, facing the two prisoners. The road was very rutty from the rain, and there were also plenty bumps. About a mile out of town Tombstone managed to get his mouth close to Speedy's ear.

"I've got my hands loose," he whispered.

ABOVE the rattle of the wagon they heard the crouching man say to the driver:

"Got a bottle with yuh?"

"On the seat!" replied the driver. "You get it; I can't even see to drive."

They could see the man stand up and help himself to the bottle. Tombstone slid ahead a little and lifted his legs. As the man started to hunch down again, a bump of the wheels sagged him forward, and the next moment he was caught in the middle by Tombstone's bent legs, and catapulted off the wagon and far into the brush. Evidently he was too surprised to even cry out, and the noise of the equipage drowned out the sound. Swiftly Tombstone liberated Speedy.

Working like a team, they came in behind the unsuspecting driver, where a strangle-hold yanked him backward, and someone took away his lines. He flailed with his arms, but hit only empty air. Speedy yanked the gun from his holster, and slugged him gently on the head. A minute later they had him all tied up with their own ropes, and Speedy was on the seat, letting the team take them home.

"Lotsa things they don't know about ropin' wrists," chuckled Tombstone. "I stole enough slack to pull a boot through, and they thought they were hurtin' me."

The team took them to a big stable, where they got down quickly. Two riders swung in behind them, but Tombstone and Speedy were deep in the shadows at the corner of the stable as the two men rode up. They dismounted, and one of them called:

"All right, boys, drag 'em out and we'll take 'em up to the house."

There was no answer. One of them said:

"Where did they go? That's a funny deal."

They came up to the wagon, and one of them lighted a match. The flame flickered out and one of them said:

"It may sound awful crazy—but that's Slim McCallun!"

"Where's Art Bevens? What happened?"

"Let's get Slim out of there. C'mon and help me take him up to the house."

"Wait! If those two got loose. Where are they? Slim's gun is gone! If they're out here—"

"Naw, if they got loose, they high-tailed it back to town. But how could they get loose? Well, let's take Slim up there. Maybe he can tell us what happened."

"If Slim knows, he's a mind-reader," whispered Tombstone.

In the meantime, Luke Horne sat in his office, grimly reading the last will and testament of Hank Buck. Windy came in, bringing with him Harry Drake. Drake looked rather sick as he slumped down in a chair, staring at Luke Horne.

"You wished to see me, Luke," he said huskily.

"That's right," replied Luke thoughtfully. "You said that, as far as you knew, Hank Buck never made out a will, didn't yuh?"

"That's right," replied the lawyer. "He never did."

Luke Horne picked up the document and glanced over it.

"Harry, I have here that will," he said.

"You—you've got what?" blurted Drake.

"The last will and testament of Hank Buck. He leaves everythin' to Johnny Briggs, except one lonesome silver dollar to Sam Mitchell."

"Impossible!" gasped Harry Drake.

"Why, I know—"

Al Benton, coatless, hatless, fairly skidded at the doorway, bumped against the side, but stayed on his feet. He blurted:

"They held me up! A masked man, I tell yuh! I went upstairs and he stuck a gun in my face. Jones and Smith are gone—I looked in their room. Somebody had a team and wagon out behind the hotel. I heard it pull out!"

WHEN Al Benton stopped to catch his breath, the sheriff said:

"Say it again, Al, but slower; I didn't get it all."

"Wait a minute!" exclaimed Windy. "You say Jones and Smith are gone? Yuh mean—somebody *took* 'em?"

"I don't know whether they was taken or not, Windy. This man held me up. He said that all I had to do was keep still and stay where I am. Then he told me to go downstairs, and when I started to go, he ran down the hallway. The door to Number seven was open, and them two fellers were gone."

"Al, have you any idea who stuck you up?" asked Luke.

"Shore," replied the hotel-keeper. "I recognized his voice."

"You recognized his voice?" asked Drake huskily.

"I shore did, Harry; it was Art Bevins."

The three men looked at each other. Luke said:

"Al, you must be—uh—mistaken. Why, Art Bevins is—"

"I'd know his voice anywhere, Luke. It was Art Bevins."

Luke got slowly to his feet, his eyes hard.

"Then that means that the Circle D—"

"Hold it!" rasped Harry Drake, as he stepped into the doorway, facing them, a forty-five in his right hand. "Don't move."

"Drake, you fool, have you gone crazy?" whispered Luke.

"No, I'm perfectly sane. Fool—yes, but not a crazy fool. Drop your guns on the floor—and do it fast."

Al Benton had no gun, but the other two gun-belts and holsters thudded to the floor. Drake made the men back up, picked up the two belts and backed to the doorway.

"Don't try to follow me," he warned. "I'll shoot to kill. You'll never take me alive."

Then he disappeared in the darkness. Luke Horne lowered his hands, rubbed his stubbled chin and erupted some unprintable sentences. Windy grinned slowly and said, "I never thought he'd turn killer. But, as they say, yuh never can tell which way a dill pickle will squirt. All right, Luke, we better wake up and take off."

Al Benton stepped over to the doorway. A horse was galloping down the street. He turned and looked at the other two.

"Do you suppose that rap on the head he got over in his office tonight done that to him?" he asked.

"That rap on the head—and this," remarked the sheriff, pointing at the paper on his desk. "This is the last will and testament of Hank Buck, Al. Either Harry didn't know about this—or he lied."

"I'll say he lied," said Windy. "Well, what are we standin' here for? Let's saddle up and find out a few things. If they've captured them two skinny critters, the least we can do is try and get 'em back."

"Why would anybody collect two specimens like that?" asked Luke. "And what's wrong with Harry Drake—sayin' we'd never take him alive? Has everybody gone loco around here?"

"If we don't do somethin'" said Windy, "they'll know *we* have."

They went outside. Windy said, "We better get some fresh guns, Luke; we might run into more crazy people. You get the guns, I'll get our horses."

Al Benton went back to the hotel and knocked on Mrs. Briggs' door. She was still awake, reading. Al Benton said:

"Molly, I've got good news for yuh. They've found Hank Buck's will, and he leaves everythin' to Johnny. Harry Drake went crazy, and held a gun on all of us, until he made a getaway."

Molly Briggs looked wide-eyed at Benton, hardly able to understand what he had told her.

"Does Johnny know?" she whispered.

"No, I don't think they told him. Windy said Johnny can't talk."

"Can't talk? What did he mean?"

"He said Johnny's got larny-geetus. Caught cold in the rain."

"Larygeetus?" queried Molly. "Oh, yes, I know what you mean. He's had it before. Can't we go down and tell him about the will?"

"No, ma'am, we can't—not now. I've had two different guns shoved into my face already tonight and I don't hanker for more. You jist take it easy. Good night, Molly."

"Two guns?" she asked.

"Uh-huh. I think some men kidnapped Jones and Smith tonight."

"They did? Mr. Benton, what is wrong around here?"

"The people," he replied dryly and closed the door.

CHAPTER VII

Time's A-wastin'

IN THOUGHTFUL silence Luke and Windy rode out of town, heading for the Circle D. Finally Luke said:

"Windy, we should have told Johnny about findin' that will. I'll bet he'd give three cheers."

"I'll take that bet, Luke," offered Windy seriously. "You knew he had a bad cold this morning, didn't yuh?"

"Yeah, he said he had. But what's that got to do with it?"

"He's got larny-geetus, and can't even whisper. I told him I'd call Doc Blythe, and he wrote on a paper, 'This ain't ringbone nor spavin.' "

"Anybody'd know that," said Luke. "They ain't the same."

"Well," sighed Windy, "I'll have to tell Johnny that he wasted that one."

"What do yuh mean?"

"Oh, sort of a pearls-before-swine idea, I reckon."

Tombstone hunched in against a side window at the ranchhouse, but was unable to hear more than an occasional word of the conversation in the house—and most of that was profanity. Speedy was down at the stable, taking care of a special duty, when a rider came swiftly into the place, jerked up sharply at the porch and went stumbling up the steps to the front door.

Banging on the door, he yelled:

"Open up! This is Harry!"

A man flung the door open and admitted the visitor. The door was kicked shut again, but bounced open a few inches. Tombstone slid ahead to the corner of the porch and house. A man snarled:

"You've sunk the whole crew, you blasted fool, you!"

"Fool, eh?" rasped Harry Drake's voice. "You open your mouth again and I'll blast you. Butch, you were going to double-cross all of us tonight when you forced me to open my safe, but somebody stopped yuh—or did they? Where's that money? You had somebody outside to take it, that's what happened. Where's Jones and Smith? Don't tell me you bungled that deal, too!"

"Set down," growled Butch Duncan. "I never gave that money to anybody—they took it. Look at my head, will yuh? Somebody got that money, and it wasn't any of our gang, Drake. Put down that gun, you fool, before yuh hurt somebody."

"I want that money and the papers," said Drake coldly. "This will of Hank Buck's was in that bunch of papers."

"You said you burned it!"

"I kept it! Do I look like a fool? If Sam Mitchell tried any of his double-crosses, I was going to be fixed to bust his jug. With that will, I could force him to do exactly what we wanted. Now, it's gone, and Luke Horne's got it."

"Shut that door!" rasped Butch. "Do you want everybody in Rawhide City to hear yuh yellin'?"

The door closed. Tombstone sank back

on his haunches, thinking over what he had heard. Speedy came crawling across the yard in the heavy shadows and joined Tombstone, who said:

"Didja get rid of all their horses?"

"All except two," replied Speedy. "We don't want to walk back."

"That was the lawyer who just got here," explained Tombstone. "He's awful upset about that will. Yuh see, he kept it to use against Sam Mitchell, in case Mitchell didn't play ball with them. He's also irked about that money. It seems that Butch Duncan was the one I got the valise from. Butch was goin' to pull out on 'em. Now, Mr. Drake is in there with a gun in his fist, and he wants to play rough."

"Things must be tough, when a lawyer has to use a gun," remarked Speedy. "Oh-oh! Look out!"

A shadowy figure appeared at the corner behind the kitchen steps, where he stood for a long time. He couldn't see the two cowpunchers, hunched in against the house. Slowly he moved around the steps, came in against the wall and began coming toward them, moving as silently as a shadow. Tombstone and Speedy hardly dared to breathe as the man came on.

ANOTHER step would have struck Speedy, but Speedy grabbed his leg, heaved quickly, and the man spun around, going down flat on his face. A second later Tombstone Jones landed on his shoulders with his bony knees, and both hands dug the man's face into the dirt, stifling any chance of an outcry.

With Tombstone on the man's shoulders, Speedy sat down on the seat of the man's pants and said huskily:

"We've got him. Now what do we do with him?"

"I dunno," whispered Tombstone. "Didja get his gun?"

"As quick as he hit the grit. This case needs persuasion."

Speedy crawled around and shoved a gun against the man's ear.

"Yuh better lift his ears out of the dirt, so he can hear me," suggested Speedy. "That's better. Pardner, can yuh hear me? If you make one yip, yuh're a gone duck. Do yuh know what I said?"

"I—I heard yuh, you specimen of skinny humanity!" husked the man. "If I ever git my hands on you—"

"Windy?" gasped Tombstone.

"Yeah—Windy! What'sa idea, anyway?"

"Sh-h-h-h!"

"Don't shush me—git off my shoulders. Where's m' gun?"

Speedy gave it back to him. Windy whispered angrily, "Of all the crazy galoots on earth! I ain't got any skin left on my nose."

"What are you doin' out here?" asked Speedy.

"Tryin' to save your worthless lives."

"That's a coincidence," said Tombstone. "You came to save us, and we saved you."

"Saved me from what?"

"Let's not go into details, Windy. You ain't thanked us yet."

"For knockin' me down and rubbin' all the skin off my nose?"

"Yeah, that's right, ain't it. We thought it was some of that gang in the house, sneakin' up on us. Yuh're lucky we didn't kill yuh."

"Sh-h-h-h!" hissed Speedy. "Man comin' up to the front."

They could hear him walking over the gravel, heard him step on the porch. Windy said, "That must be Luke."

"Open the door," called the man in a weak voice. "Can'tcha open the door?"

"Who is it?" asked a voice.

"Art Bevins," replied the man outside.

The door opened and they heard the man stumble inside. There was a buzz of conversation, but inaudible. Tombstone said:

"That must be the person I kicked out of the wagon. It shore took him a long time to get home."

"Did they kidnap yuh?" asked Windy.

"Oh, sure," replied Tombstone.

"Is Harry Drake in there?"

"Yeah, he's in there. How'd yuh know?"

"He stuck up me and Luke at the office, and got away."

"Well, well!" said Tombstone. "The

man has promise. Now if we—"

"Wait a minute," interrupted Windy. "Me and Luke want to know what this is all about? Yuh see, we don't know much."

"We figured that out the first time we saw yuh," said Speedy.

"I mean we don't know much about this deal. Where does Harry Drake fit into this thing, and the Circle D? Who robbed Drake and why have they tried to kill you two? It don't make sense."

"It shore don't," agreed Tombstone. "Well, don't feel badly; you figured that out."

"But what's goin' on in the house?"

As if in answer to Windy's question, a gun blasted hollowly. Following that first shot, it sounded like a handful of firecrackers going off. A man screamed a curse, and a moment later the window over the heads of the three men outside erupted in a shower of broken glass and splintered window frame, as a heavy chair smashed through it and landed a few feet away.

Then a man's voice snarled:

"You forgot that a man might have a second gun, you fools! Stay here and hang for it, if you want to! I'm leavin' for Mexico."

THEN the man dived through the window, followed by a shot that sang through the window over his plunging body. Tombstone had lifted almost to his feet, and as the man dived out, Tombstone caught his shoulder against the man's chest and hurled him ten feet away. A man ran to the window, leaning out, trying to find a target, when Speedy grabbed his arm, twisted and jerked, and the man came out on his head, the gun flying into the darkness.

The man who had dived through the window was trying to get up, wheezing and panting, trying to fill his depleted lungs, but Tombstone banged into him and he went down again. Windy and Speedy were sitting on their other victim, when Luke Horne yelled anxiously:

"Windy! Windy, are you all right?"

[*Turn page*]

oh-oh, Dry Scalp!
"SAM'S nice, but he'd be a lot nicer if he did something about that Dry Scalp! His hair is dull and unruly—and he has loose dandruff, too! I've got just the ticket for him—'Vaseline' Hair Tonic!"
Hair looks better... scalp feels better... when you check Dry Scalp
Vaseline
IT'S EASIER than you think! 'Vaseline' Hair Tonic checks Dry Scalp . . . makes a world of difference in the good looks of your hair. It's ideal with massage before shampooing, too. Contains no alcohol or other drying ingredients. It's double care . . . for both scalp and hair . . . and it's economical.
Vaseline HAIR TONIC
TRADE MARK ®
Listen to DR. CHRISTIAN, starring JEAN HERSHOLT, on CBS Wednesday nights.
VASELINE is the registered trade mark of the Chesebrough Mfg. Co., Cons'd

"Everythin' under control, Luke!"

The big sheriff came pounding around the corner, stopped short and looked at them. There was some light through the broken window.

"Who got shot?" he asked anxiously. "All those shots—"

He stopped, peered through the window and blurted:

"Two dead men in there! For heaven's sake, what happened?"

Tombstone swung Harry Drake on his shoulder and started for the porch.

"Speedy, you and Windy bring the other one," he said and went staggering up the steps.

The sheriff looked over their collection. Butch Duncan was the one Speedy had yanked through the window. Butch had been shot by Drake, but was not hurt too badly. Slim McCallum and Art Bevins were on the floor, unmoving. The sheriff turned from looking them over and looked at Tombstone and Speedy.

"Do yuh have to lie to me?" he asked sadly.

"Not intentionally, sheriff," replied Tombstone.

"Then tell me what this is all about?"

Harry Drake was trying to sit up. He looked dazed, frightened.

"Mind talkin' a little?" asked Tombstone. "Remember, this was yore party, Drake."

"I don't talk," he declared thinly.

"I do," croaked Butch. "I'll talk. You," he pointed a shaking finger at Tombstone, "were in that stable at the JK—that night."

"Yeah, that's right, Butch. You fellers had Johnny Briggs tied up there while yuh robbed the train. You left his hat, tryin' to put the deadwood on him."

"You got that express money, too."

"We shore did, Butch. Sheriff, that train robbery money is up in the JK hayloft, under the hay."

"Good Lord!" breathed the sheriff. "Keep goin', Jones."

"All right. Drake lied about that will. He wanted half of the HB spread, so he made a deal with Sam Mitchell for the half which Mr. Drake was goin' to take away from Mitchell. Butch and his gang have been stealin' HB and Box B cows, sellin' the meat, and dumpin' the hides into a mine shaft."

"Is that true, Butch?" asked the sheriff.

"Yeah, it's true enough. It was all Drake's idea. He kept all the money in his safe." Butch looked up at Tombstone and said:

"Did you hit me on the head tonight?"

"Yeah, I did, Butch. Sheriff, the money and papers from Drake's safe are in my war-sack at the hotel. Drake knew that me and Speedy were goin' with Windy to the Briggs place, so he had this gang try to dynamite us. Sam Mitchell came ahead and ruined it for them."

"And," added Windy, "I'm smart enough to realize that they kidnaped you two tonight to force yuh to tell where yuh hid all that money."

"Go to the head of the class, Windy," said Speedy.

"Where's Tom Reed?" asked the sheriff.

"He's dead, Luke. You'll find him in that old line-shack on the Coldwater trail. One of them two shot him that night at the JK stable, when he went back in to try and set the place on fire."

LUKE HORNE leaned aganist the wall and looked around.

"My head is buzzin' with too much stuff," he said slowly. "Johnny Briggs is exonerated, he gets the HB spread, and—and—what else?"

"You shore busted up a cold-blooded rustlin' gang, Sheriff," said Tombstone. "Nice work. We got into it kinda by accident. Yuh see, a man handed us the money at the train robbery."

Butch exploded a painful oath and groaned a little.

"We pulled the job at Yolo," he said weakly. "Me and Slim rode the engine, while Art and Tom were to pick up the money outside the fence. They were late—and these two hyenas got it in the dark."

"What's a hyena?" asked Tombstone.

"Never mind," said the sheriff. "Let's get the wagon and haul this outfit back to town."

Men crowded around the wagon as they unloaded at the sheriff's office. Harry Drake was able to walk, but Butch Duncan had to be carried in. The other two were in very bad shape and were taken down to the doctor's house. Al Benton brought Molly Briggs down to the office, where the sheriff released Johnny. Both he and his wife were overjoyed, but Johnny couldn't talk, not even in whispers.

Luke said to Tombstone, "Johnny will shore want to thank you boys, but he can't now. He's got somethin'—I think they call it larny-geetus."

"How do yuh spell it?" asked Speedy.

"Search me—it hits him in the throat. I'm headin' down to Yolo and over to the JK spread to find that money before some cowpuncher gets a strange idea."

"Jist a minute," said Speedy. "If yuh're goin' to Yolo, will you send a telegram for me?"

"If yuh ask me," replied Luke, "I'd be proud to—and I don't care if yuh're sendin' it to the president."

"It's to the secretary," said Speedy.

He sat down at the sheriff's desk, took a telegraph blank and sent the following telegram to Jim Keaton:

EXCEPT FOR INCLEMENT WEATHER WE HAVE ENJOYED RAWHIDE CITY TO THE UTMOST. BY THE WAY THE MAN YOU TOLD US TO MEET HERE IS SUFFERING FROM LARNYGEETUS AND CAN'T SPEAK A WORD. IF YOU KNOW WHY HE WANTED US PLEASE FURNISH DETAILS, AND WE WILL BE GLAD TO ASSIST HIM. SPEEDY JOINS ME IN WISHING YOU A PROSPEROUS SEASON.

TOMBSTONE JONES

"That's the stuff!" applauded Tombstone. "That'll learn him not to waste our time. If he'd told us himself, instead of waitin' for somebody else to tell us, we could have finished up here and been ready for another job by this time."

"We get rusty, too, layin' around thisaway," said Speedy.

The fist-flinging, gun-quick cow detectives tackle a passel of rustlers and robbers in a yarn that's full of fun and fast fighting, start to finish!

SIX-GUN CYCLONE

A Tombstone and Speedy Novelet

By W. C. TUTTLE

•

FEATURED NEXT ISSUE—PLUS MANY OTHER PUNCH-PACKED STORIES!

Lawman, DRAG THAT IRON!

Town Marshal Callan arranges a deal with Kid Lavender—to make the law look good!

THE DRIFTING saddlebum brought the news to Hangtree a little before noon that Saturday, and from that moment a man's name was on everyone's lips:

Kid Lavender.

Not an ugly name, certainly. Almost a musical name. And yet the sound of it was the sound of death. The blazing August sun was suddenly without warmth. The chill of the name touched everyone, followed them as they left the boardwalks to gather behind the doors of their homes and in the dimness of saloons.

Marshal Steve Callan, wearing the star for the fourth year, pushed through the batwings of the Drovers' Bar and strode across the sawdust toward the door at the back marked *Private*. He was not yet

By JONATHAN CRAIG

thirty, a tall, slope-shouldered man with smoke-gray eyes in an angular face that was hard without being cruel.

He opened the door and stepped into the stored heat of the back room, heavy with the fumes of whiskey and cigars. He leaned back against the door, thumbs hooked loosely in his gun belt, his eyes tallying the assembled dozen around the circular poker table.

Mayor Tom Hagerman glanced up at Callan. His round, pink face was flushed with liquor. "You could have knocked, Callan," he said with annoyance.

"I could have," Callan said mildly.

Hagerman stared at Callan, letting his breath out very slowly. Finally he said, "I take it you know why we sent for you?"

Callan nodded. "Somebody saw Kid Lavender down on Taylor Creek, and now you figure he's coming back to Hangtree."

Hagerman's eyes widened. "Don't you?"

"No. Why would he?"

Hagerman coughed, looked around at the faces at the table. "Norma, for one reason."

Callan felt the muscles bunching along his wide shoulders. He took one step forward. "Hagerman," he said, "I ain't taking that personal. But make it the last time you use my wife's name in this place."

The flush in Hagerman's cheeks seemed to darken. He said, "No need to get riled, Marshal. I'm not speaking as one man. I'm speaking for everybody in this town. There's a killer down on Taylor Creek with more than a dozen notches on his gun. Likely he's riding this way right now."

BESIDE Hagerman, Coe Wrigley, the town banker, laughed harshly. "Likely, hell! You know he's heading for here, Tom."

Hagerman said, "There's no use dragging this out. He has to be stopped, Callan, and you're the gent with the star. What do you aim to do about it?"

Steve Callan shrugged. "If he comes inside the town limits, I'll do the job I'm paid for. Otherwise—"

"Otherwise, what?"

"Why then it's a job for the Sheriff, if you want to send a man to the county seat to get him. I got no authority outside the town, Hagerman. You know that."

Hagerman folded soft fat hands on the edge of the table, staring at Callan. "Marshal, there's those who think you draw too fine a line when it comes to your law job," he said. "You're right there when it comes to talking up ideas for schools and churches. You've got a lot of high and mighty ideas about teaching folks to respect the law instead of being scared of it. You—"

Callan said softly, "Thin kind of palaver don't listen so good. You got something in your craw, get it out."

Hagerman's eyes locked with Callan's. He said, "Either take off that star—or get out there and stop that mad dog on Taylor Creek." He tried to hold Callon's gaze, and failed. His eyes stared at the backs of his soft hands. "You understand Marshal, I'm speaking as Mayor of this town, not as one man."

"I understand," Callan told him. "If I didn't, you wouldn't still be talking." He nodded to the others at the table, turned and left the room. . . .

Steve Callan waited until the horse and rider were ten yards beyond his hiding place behind the pile of rocks before he stepped out and raised his gun.

He said, "Drop your gun belt, Bert, and get off that horse."

The man did as he was told. On the ground, he turned slowly to face Callan, his eyes pale slits of hate against his sun-blackened skin. He was not quite as tall as Callan, but he was heavier through the shoulders and his sweat-drenched denim shirt moulded a barrel chest that tapered to almost no waist at all.

Recognition came into his pale eyes. He said the one word, "Callan!" and some of the tautness seemed to leave his body.

Callan said, "I was hoping I'd never have to do this, Bert." He grinned, try-

ing to make it friendly. "Or do you like that Kid Lavender handle better?"

The other man said, "So they pinned a star on you! They could have picked a faster gun, Steve."

Callan said, "Come over here, Bert. And keep your hands where I can see them."

Greer came close. He said, "You was smart to throw down from behind. In a fair fight I'd of cracked six caps before you cleared leather."

CALLAN nodded. "Probably so. Bert Greer's gun speed is a pretty famous thing in these parts. Too famous. Every younker in Hangtree thinks you're a hero. The older folks think different. They want you brought in."

Bert Greer's voice was edged with bitterness. "You know something, Steve? This is real funny. Hell, I wasn't even going to pass through your two-bit town! I was heading for the border."

"Why?"

"Because I was through with trouble." Some of the bitterness faded from his voice. "I've got me a girl down in the Rio country. I was going to her."

Callan studied the man's dark face. "You expect me to believe that, Bert?"

Greer looked straight into his eyes. "You and me was pards for twenty-five years," he said. "You never once heard me lie. I ain't exactly no violet, Steve, but I sure as hell ain't no liar."

That was true, Callan knew. There were two sure things about Bert Greer; he was hell with a gun, and he would back his word with his life.

"Bert," Callan said, "keep your mouth shut a minute."

"You going to make a speech?"

"Yeah, and you're going to listen," Callan told him. "Riding out here this morning I got to asking myself just what profit there was in taking you back to a rope. Hanging you wouldn't bring all those men you killed back to life. Besides, they were gunfighters, too. As long as you glory hunters stick to killing one another, you save us lawmen a lot of trouble. But there's another side to it. The kids."

"What've they got to do with it?"

"Plenty. They've made idols out of you and your breed. They're growing up wanting to be Kid Lavenders. Unless something starts them thinking different, a lot of them are going to turn out just like you."

"And you'd rather they turned out like you?"

"No. I wouldn't want them wearing guns—on *either* side of the law. All I want is for them to grow up to be decent." He paused, took a deep breath. "And I got something in mind that might help."

Greer snorted. "You're a queer one, Callan. I think maybe you're a little soft."

Callan said, "Two of those younkers back in town are mine, Bert. Mine and Norma's."

A strange look came into Bert Greer's eyes. Very slowly he took tobacco and papers from his shirt pocket and fashioned a cigarette. He smoothed it, struck a match on his thumbnail. Over the flame his eyes met Callan's.

"How is she, Steve?" he said carelessly. "Still pretty, I reckon?"

Callan nodded, said nothing.

"Funny," Greer said. "I never could get around to hating you for that."

"It might have been different—if you hadn't turned into Kid Lavender. You sort of helped her make up her mind, Bert."

"A lot of things *might* have been different. . . ." He shrugged. "What now, lawman?"

Callan said, "I've got an idea that if those younkers back there could see a gunman crumble, could see him back down to a lawman, they'd change their way of thinking."

"What are you driving at?"

"I was thinking that if you rode into Hangtree—and I chased you out again—it might turn the trick."

GREER looked at him a long moment. "You mean you think I'd turn yellow, Steve?"

"No. I mean you could *act* like you did. If you're leaving the country anyway, what have you got to lose?"

"And why would I do a fool thing like that?"

"Because there's a girl down Rio way —and because if you go through with it you can be riding to her in thirty minutes."

Greer's eyes were cautious. "How would we work it?"

Callan said, "Like I told you, I've been turning this idea over ever since I left Hangtree. What I figure is that I could ride back and go in the Drovers' for a beer. You circle the town and come in on the other side. That'll take you a few minutes longer, and give me a chance to get settled."

"And then?"

"Then you come in the Drovers' and walk straight to the bar. I'll tell you to get out and start coming for you. You make it look like you're going to call my hand. But when I get right up to you—bolt and run like hell."

Greer rubbed his cigarette out between thumb and forefinger, his eyes steady. He said, "I'd almost sooner be hung."

"It's your choice," Steve Callan said quietly.

Greer said, "Steve, you're either a brave man or a damned fool. Either way, I reckon you've got yourself a deal."

"I want your word on that, Bert."

"You've got it." His voice was sincere. "And Steve—thanks for the break."

"It's the younkers I'm thinking of," Steve said.

He retrieved his horse from behind the pile of rocks where he had hidden it, mounted, and headed back along the trail to Hangtree.

The hot, dusty length of Main Street was almost deserted when Steve Callan swung off his horse in front of the Drovers Bar and went inside.

He nodded a greeting to the row of men standing three deep at the long bar and picked his way through the deal tables to the rear of the big room. But he did not enter the door marked *Private*. He wanted no conversation with anyone. He took a table at the back of the big room and ordered beer.

He sat quietly, sipping the warm beer, watching the dust motes in the wedge of sunlight that slanted through the opening above the batwings. He knew that every eye in the saloon was upon him, that the heavy silence would soon break. A boot scraped nervously. A few hoarse whispers drifted to him from the direction of the bar.

Callan shifted his weight on the chair, took another sip of the beer. What if Bert Greer reneged? He forced the thought from his mind, took out tobacco and papers, began to fashion a cigarette. He didn't want a smoke, but he was too tense. He had to do something with his hands.

The batwings burst open. Bert Greer stood there, wearing the lavender shirt. He was not smiling and his hands, hovering near his holsters, were like claws. His pale eyes swept the room as he sauntered to the bar. Where men had stood three deep, there was now a wide, empty space for him.

STEVE CALLAN pushed back his chair, stood up. He took a hitch at his gun belt, moved toward the bar. His boots echoed hollowly on the rough pine planking. There was no other sound. The saloon was as silent as boothill.

At the bar, Bert Greer turned slowly to face him. And then the silence broke and men cursed and shoved one another as they scrambled out of the line of fire.

"Don't bother to order," Callan said. "You're moving on, friend. Sudden."

Bert Greer's eyes narrowed, traveled insolently the length of Callan's rangy body. His voice was without expression, almost a whisper.

"That so, Marshal?" he said, and looked straight into Callan's eyes.

And now Steve Callan saw the hot lights deep in Greer's pale eyes and knew that he gazed into the eyes of death itself. He realized with sickening suddenness that he had been a damned fool. He

had taken the longest gamble of his life —and he had lost. He knew with terrible certainty that Bert Greer had lied, that he was going to kill him.

Greer moved one step away from the bar, his long arms hanging straight down. To the bartender, he said, "Pour me a drink. Make it a long one, and leave the bottle by the glass." His lips spread back from white strong teeth as he looked at Callan.

He said, "You *sure* you got an objection to me having a drink, Marshal?"

Callan wet his lips. There were only two things he could do. He could draw and die—or he could crawfish, run away, despise himself for the rest of his life. He felt the slow crawl of sweat along his ribs, the hammer of blood at his temples.

He had known fear before, but never of another man. He knew it now. It flooded through him, clawed at his stomach. He felt as if he were going to be sick.

Somehow he forced words past the tightness of his throat. His voice sounded strange in his ears.

He said, "Well—have your drink—and —then leave."

Bert Greer's dark, leering face blurred before his eyes. He tried to say something else, but could not. There was no use trying to bluff himself or anyone else. He could no longer face Bert Greer. He turned and shouldered his way through the speechless, astonished men, walking on weak legs that somehow carried him to the street.

HE RODE to his house at the far edge of town, and for the first time in his life he used his spurs. He tried not to think, not to admit to himself that this nightmarish thing had really happened.

Norma was waiting for him. For an instant she was small and soft and warm in his arms, and then she drew back from him and a question formed in her wide blue eyes.

"Steve!" she said gently. "What's wrong?"

"We're leaving," he told her. "Start getting things together. We're clearing out of this town as soon as we can. Today."

Her troubled eyes searched his own. "Steve, you've got to tell me what's happened!"

"Nothing," he said. "Now, hurry!"

She was still a long moment. Then, "Is it Bert Greer, Steve?"

"No! Not Greer. Not anyone." But he could read it in her face, the comprehension, and now the last fragment of his pride crumbled.

She turned away from him, walked toward the kichen.

"I'll start packing," she said. "The children are playing out in back. I'll call them."

His gaze followed her. He cursed softly, for now two of them had to live with his cowardice.

He said, "I'll be back soon. I've got to go to the jail for some of my things."

He left his horse tied at the front gate and walked the three dusty blocks back to the jail. He had to think, get himself together.

He let himself into the office and sat down heavily in the chair behind the scarred desk. There was no one in the two cells behind him. Except for a bottle fly droning against the ceiling, he had the place to himself.

There was a tintype of Norma on his desk and he found himself staring at it instead of going about the business of getting his stuff together. He thought, *I've lost her. She'll still be my wife, but I've lost her just the same.*

He threw a sheaf of wanted circulars in the waste basket and crossed to the window. He stood there, wide shoulders slumped, thinking of the things he had wanted for this town. He had talked big, but when the chips were down, when it came to the biggest play of all, he had been all bluff and no guts.

His fingers moved up to touch the star on his shirt, then jerked away. He was one hell of a lawman. He had helped make a kill-crazy gunman even more of a hero, an idol.

He thought about that, and gradually the churning feeling in his stomach began to lessen. He had lost Norma, the respect of the town, his pride—everything—and yet a strange inner calmness came to him. It was not too late . . . not if he faced Greer again, and if he acted like a man.

He would die, he knew, but that was better than the slow day-to-day dying of the coward, a death that Norma would have to share. And one day his children would know and they, too, would feel the slow rot of his cowardice. He had no choice; he was a fool not to have realized that from the first.

THE screen door slammed behind as he left his office and stepped into the yellow dust of Main Street. He saw a man's face framed in the opening over a pair of swinging doors. He called, "You there, friend. Kindly step down to the Drovers' and tell Kid Lavender I want to see him. Out here in the street."

The man's eyes widened with surprise. He came out of the saloon and loped along the boardwalk toward the Drovers'.

Standing there in the middle of the street, Callan checked his gun. It was ready, the way it always was. He watched the messenger disappear inside the Drovers', and now there was nothing left to do but wait. A hundred thoughts stabbed at his mind, but he forced them away.

There was a movement of color at the doors of the Drovers.' Without hurry, Bert Greer stepped through them and out onto the boardwalk. He was thirty yards away, but Callan could see the glitter in his eyes, the whiteness of his teeth against his dark face.

Greer stepped down into the street, paused a moment to turn and wave in the direction of the Drovers', then started forward.

He's fast, Callan thought. *He's the fastest that wears a gun.* He remembered how they had practiced drawing together, those long years ago, and how he had always been slower than Greer—but a trifle more accurate. That was his one faint hope: accuracy. If only Greer's first slug didn't kill him—if only he had a chance to trigger once, just once, he knew he could put a slug within inches of where he wanted it.

He ran his tongue across dry lips. He knew that Greer was enjoying this, that he wouldn't make his play until the last possible moment. Besides, Greer wouldn't want to trust his own wildness at long range. He'd wait until they were so close that only his speed would matter.

Callan fixed his eyes on the second pearl button on Bert Greer's lavender shirt. He sucked in his breath and his hand stabbed down for his gun.

Bert Greer's draw was faster. It was only a lavender blur of shirt sleeves and a yellow blossom of flame.

Callan felt Greer's lead smash against his ribs even as his own gun bucked in his hand. He saw Greer's gun slip from his fingers as the big man took two short, awkward steps toward him. Then Greer's body folded at the middle and he sprawled forward in the dust.

The street seemed to tilt beneath Steve Callan's boots. The ragged lines of false-fronted buildings revolved around him lazily. He saw the yellow dust swirling up to meet him, felt it hot against his face. And then there was nothing.

When he opened his eyes again it was to see the white, anxious face of his wife bending over him where he lay on the boardwalk. The pain in his side was like the sear of a branding iron.

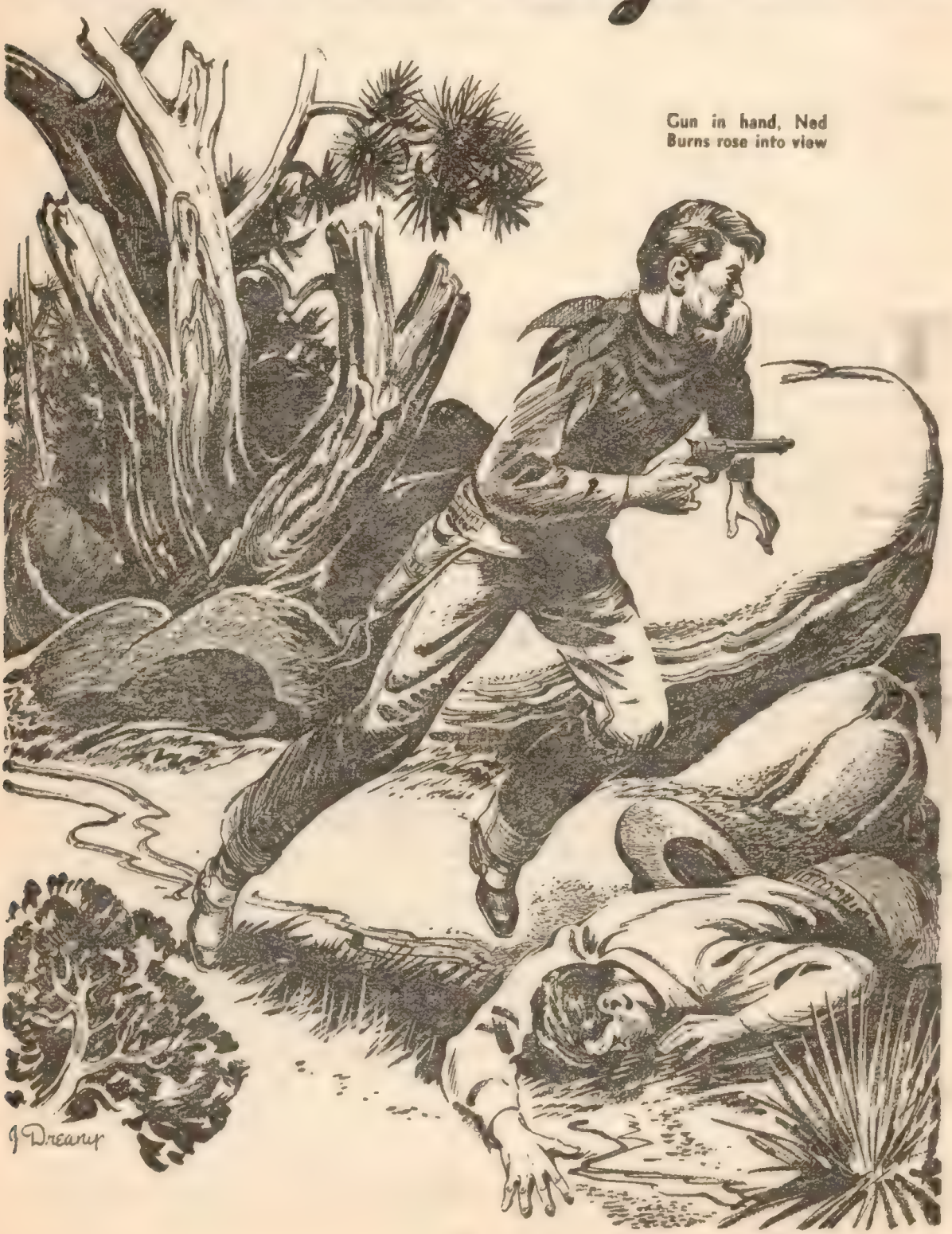
Another face loomed above him, the seamed face of Doc Winters. The old man grinned. "You ain't dead, son. And you ain't likely to be." The grin faded. "Other fellow is, though. You got him dead center."

Callan's eyes found his wife's. He liked the look he saw there, and he liked the cool touch of her hand against his forehead.

He smiled up at her. "Looks like we'll be staying here a while longer, Norma," he said. "Guess you can stop packing our things now."

"Steve," she said softly, "I never even started."

The Makings of a



Gun in hand, Ned Burns rose into view

COWMAN

Ned Burns was a gaunt gray wolf of the ranges, and neither drouth nor storm nor the threat of gun-blazing death could touch his loyalty!

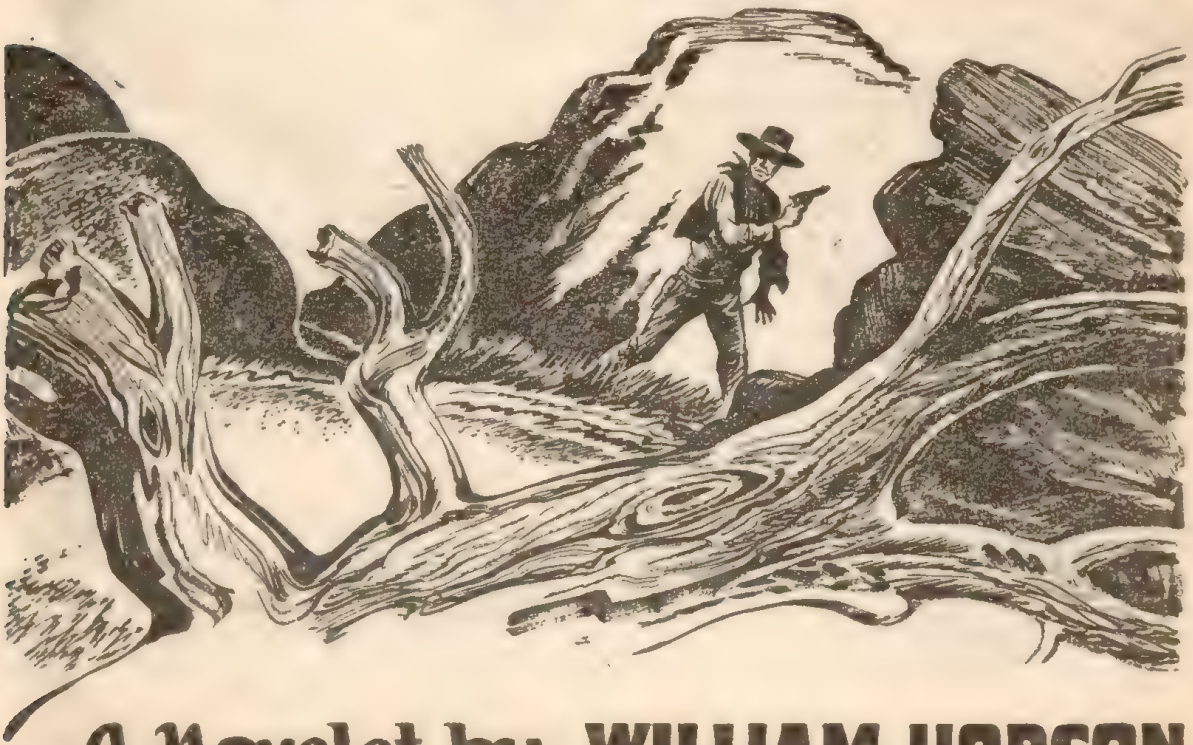
CHAPTER I

Payday

THE EIGHT ragged punchers of old man Harry Kennedy closed the last cattle car door and let out great sighs of relief at sight of the long line of cars on the siding, all filled with Lazy K beef. It wasn't much beef. They were too stringy, the drouth having been the worst in nearly fifty years. But the cattle were loaded, there were to be back wages of a year, and they could see the Old Man over talking to the buyer from Gamble and Horner. The buyer had the check in his hand. He stood there beside the Old Man, extending the yellow slip of paper that meant so much to them all.

"Here it is, Harry," he said. "The figures we agreed upon."

"Fine, fine," Kennedy said, taking it and tucking it in a pocket without looking at it.



a Novelet by **WILLIAM HOPSON**

"I wish we could have paid you more," the buyer said. "But when this drouth hit, so many of our customers dumped their stuff on the market to get rid of them until the rains come again. It drove beef prices down. Then, too, the condition—"

"I know," Kennedy said. "It's the kind of a year every cowman knows has to come and dreads, and I'm glad it's over. Tell your bosses thanks, and I'll see you next year."

"I'll be here," the buyer said, and they shook hands.

Kennedy went to his horse and swung up, quite easily for a man in his sixties. He looked around, noticing that his eight men already were mounted and waiting. He knew what they were waiting for. They hadn't been paid in a year.

"All right, boys," he called. "Let's head for the bank."

"Hot dawg!" whooped young Jim Stannifer, slapping his pardner, Ned Burns, on the back. "Now we git paid off an' am I gonna bust up the town!"

He was red headed, handsome, just twenty-two, and had broken the heart of every girl in town. In contrast, his pardner, Ned Burns, also twenty-two, was blonde, freckled, homely, and serious.

"Cheer up," Stannifer grinned at his companion as the eight men followed the Old Man toward town. "Git that solemn look off your face, boy! It's payday—after one whole year."

They rode on in to town and, in front of the false fronted bank, the Old Man swung down. He went inside and the others trooped after him, happy, grinning, and licking their lips in anticipation of a celebration with real money in their pockets, instead of the barkeeps to put it on a slip of paper until pay-off time came. This was pay-off time.

Kennedy went in, and Ed Harber, the banker, rose from his desk in a corner back of the wicket wiring.

He said, "Come in, Harry. I hear you're shipping."

"Yea," the Old Man said in an effort at carelessness, though it was noticeable that his shoulders were not quite as stooped as they had been during the past months. "Here's the check. I want to pay off my boys."

Harber took the check and looked at it; a small, wiry, dark faced man who had been a cowman himself. "Gamble and Horner, eh? That's good enough for me, Harry. Glad you were able to ship. How much cash you need?"

"About seven thousand to cover wages and what I owe at the store. Can I use your office to pay off?"

"Sure. I'll have one of the clerks bring you the money."

Kennedy went in through the door the banker opened for him and sat down back of the desk. He took a black book from his pocket that looked like an ordinary tally book. While he was looking over figures the banker and a clerk came in with a big canvas sack and dumped the contents on the table before him. Gold backed bills, gold minted coins, silver dollars, and a batch of change consisting of halves, quarters, dimes, nickels, and even pennies.

"Want to count it?" the banker asked.

"No," the Old Man said. "Your word's good enough for me. Thanks for bringing it in."

HE CALLED out a name and a ragged looking rider came into the office. The Old Man named the figures, named the deductions for supplies at the store, named the few dollars he'd been able to advance the rider, and paid off the balance in cash. Another rider followed. And still others.

Only the two pardners, Jim Stannifer and Ned Burns, were left. Stannifer went in. He was grinning over his shoulder.

"Don't forget the cattle, Jim," Ned told him.

The Old Man looked up over his glasses at the ragged young puncher standing in front of him. The banker had taken a chair and was watching, a cigar between his fingers.

"Let's see now, Jim," Kennedy said, thumbing down the figures in the tally book. "You got a year an' two weeks comin'. At fifty dollars a month that's six

hundred and twenty-five dollars. You bought two hundred an' twenty dollars worth of stuff at the store, includin' that new saddle you coulda done without. That leaves four hundred an' five dollars you got comin'. I let you have thirty dollars I borrowed from the bank, makin' three hundred and seventy-five cash. Right?"

"Right," grinned young Stannifer carelessly. "You keep the books, I punch the cows. Just gimme the cash."

"About them cows you wanted to buy an' throw in with Ned's," the rancher said. "You tol' me a few months back—"

"Aw, hell, Harry, I got things to do. Let's wait until next year," interrupted the grinning redhead. "Just gimme the cash—if you've got it."

"I've got it," grunted out the rancher, and counted it out. There was something in his mien that told of disappointment. He paid off and young Jim Stannifer went out, grinning. "See you over in the Corner House, Ned," he half whooped.

"All right, Ned, you're next and last," called the cattleman.

Ned Burns came in. His clothes somehow seemed less ragged than the others, and they displayed evidence of having been washed and patched. He was ragged but he was clean.

He stood there before his boss, and the quietly smoking banker, waiting. He was homely and he knew it. During the four years he had been "pardners" with young Jim Stannifer it had always been brought home to him that he was homely. He knew it when men compared them; when, at the dances, women compared them and always went for Jim. Even Ruth Monroe, level headed and beautiful as she was, had been overwhelmed by the good looks and easy going grin of Stannifer, Burns' pardner of the same age. He had come to the point of concluding that he just didn't fit in; a clod hopping cowpuncher fit only to save his money and nothing else.

"Let's see," the Old Man said, tally book in hand. "A year an' two weeks wages at fifty dollars a month. That's six hundred and twenty-five dollars I owe you in pay, Ned. An' my figgers show you drawed just ninety dollars cash an' credit at the store. That's five hundred and thirty-five you got left. Want it in cash, too?"

"No, Mr. Kennedy," Ned said. "I'd like it in cows as usual. I've got thirty of your head running under my iron now. I'd like to spend five hundred more on cattle an' keep the thirty-five for expenses."

"Hmm. I see," the rancher replied, and looked at the banker with a quick side glance that said many pleased things. "All right, son. Cows are selling for about eighteen dollars a head now. But I like the way you work hard an' don't spend your money in the saloons. I want to see you get ahead. So here's what I'll do. You go out an' pick yoreself out—let's see, at fifteen dollars a head." He bent and figured with the pencil on a clean sheet of the tally book. "Yep, you go out in' pick you out thirty-three head of good stock—an' be sure the cows are with calf. I know what a hard time I had gettin' started, an' I want to help you, Ned. That'll give you sixty-three head of critters under your own iron. Not a bad start for a puncher who's only twenty-two. Only question now is, Ned, I'm in bad shape for range. I need all the grass I've got to pull through."

Ned Burns recognized the hesitation and worry in his boss's mien. He said, "I've thought of that, sir. Do you remember the old Bascomb homestead on Cottonwood Creek, just south of the ranch? Well, the land office said it's open again, so we filed on it. Sort of figured that me an' Jim could run our stuff down there an' work for you on the side. The old buildings are kinda run down, but we can put a new roof on an'—"

"You takin' Jim Stannifer in as pardner?" snapped the Old Man.

Burns looked surprised. "Why, of course, sir. Him an' me been pardners since we was kids."

"But he's got no cattle," snapped back the rancher. "He's got nothing. He drinks an' raises hell with the girls while you don't. He spends his money while you save your'n. Right now he's over in the saloon blowing up the places an' gettin'

ready to whoop it up at the dance tonight. That's not good business, Ned."

"I like Jim, Ned," the banker put in quietly. "He's a good boy when it comes to punching cows. But there is a place—a point where friendship stops and business begins. I'd advise against it, boy."

Ned Burns' jaw hardened; took on a stubborn look. His face grew cold. It began to freeze. "That's my own business, sir," he said stiffly. "Jim an' me are pardners."

He took up the small balance of his money, went over to a window, and deposited it in a checking account. The two men still sat there looking at each other after he was gone.

"That boy," the banker murmured, "has the makings of a good cowman, Harry. He's got the stuff. But his blind loyalty to young Stannifer will ruin him. Stannifer's no good."

"He's a good hand, and that's all I'm interested in," half grunted the rancher. "Well, take the rest of that check and put it against what I owe you. Leave me a couple of thousand to operate. Maybe next year I can clear off."

He got up and went out, a little heavily, a little tired looking. The banker took the check.

CHAPTER II

Pardners

NED BURNS went over to the store. He bought himself a new shirt, some socks, and a pair of gloves, writing a check for them. The Old Man would have money to pay off for awhile. From the store he went to the lumber yard and arranged for the things he'd need for him and Jim to fix up the old place. They could do without shingles. The lumber would do to fix up the roof, and they could cover it with sod. While he was arranging for the stuff on credit Hank Colton came in, a lean, capable looking man who ranched several miles to the south. He came over and shook hands.

"Hello, Ned. Heard you're a homesteader now, boy," he grinned.

Ned told him of the cattle and what his plans were, doing it with the touch of concealed pride of a man of twenty-two. "And so," he finished, "that's about the way she shapes up. There's plenty of water in the creek, but I got to have more range for them sixty-three head. If you still want to lease me the four sections on your northern range I was asking you about a few weeks back, we'd sure admire to have 'em. We ain't got the money now, but we can pay you so much outa our wages."

"You can have them, son," Colton replied. "I sold off everything, even some of my stockers, until things get better. I won't be needin' the range for another couple of years yet. But I could use some money, if you got it. I'm sorta in a bind myself."

"I'll go over and see Jim right now," Ned Burns replied. "I'll get two hundred off him."

"All right, boy. That'll be fine. Glad to see you getting a start for yourself."

Ned went out and Colton turned to Boswell, the lumberman. "A good boy, there," he said. "But he won't get any money from that Stannifer kid. I just saw him lose his roll to that driftin' saddle tramp named Poke McCauley. He was so drunk he couldn't see his cards."

Ned cut around to the cross street and went over to the Corner House, a big frame building facing the square. He pushed in the swinging doors and then ducked as a whiskey bottle crashed against the wall not far from his head. He saw Stannifer struggling in the arms of Poke McCauley and another Kennedy rider. His eyes were blazing at the latter.

"You been astin' for it for a whole year an' now I'm goin' to beat your head off," he was grunting. "Lemme go, Poke. I'll bash his head in."

"Take it easy, boy," McCauley said, a tall, saturnine faced man of twenty-seven with a drooping blond mustache. "He ain't mad at you, Jim. Slow down, boy, an'

lemme buy you a drink. If anybody gets mad at him fer sayin' I cheated you, I'll be the one. An' I'm plumb satisfied."

Stannifer was still struggling and cursing the wary-eyed rider at whom his wrath was directed. The rider—Bo-Bo Johnson — saw Burns and shrugged. "Maybe you can do somethin' with him, Ned," he said. "He lost his roll to McCauley here, so drunk he couldn't see his cards, and I figgered he was bein' took advantage of. So he got sore an'—"

McCauley had turned loose of Jim Stannifer's arm. He froze, his eyes cold, and then it got quiet in the room. "You talk too much," he rasped out at Bo-Bo, hand dropping to his gun. "Now say it again and I'll blow your guts out."

Then he drew swiftly. The gun was half clear of the sheath, lining death at the unarmed Bo-Bo when Ned Burns' hand slapped down hard on the man's wrist and yanked. The weapon exploded floorward, and Burns wrested it free. He handed the gun back to Poke McCauley.

"I'll take care of Jim," he said quietly. "And it ain't healthy to throw a gun on an unarmed man in this country, mister. Come on, Jim. I want to talk to you."

He got his pardner out, putting down disappointment that Jim was now broke again, and took him over across the street to a local cafe, run by a Mexican. After about the fourth cup of black coffee Jim Stannifer began to sober a little. He grinned his freckled grin.

"Well, I sure blowed her in a hurry," he said. "Ain't even got a new shirt for the dance tonight, and the store won't gimme no credit on account I drink. I got to go see the old man and draw some against my wages. You seen him?"

"Think he's over in the store now," Ned replied, and had to go back and tell Colton he couldn't get the money for the lease.

He promised to pay half his wages each month, as long as the Old Man could pay him, and Colton grinned and said he guessed that would be all right. Ned went on to the lumber yard again, told the lumberman he'd borrow a ranch outfit to come get his supplies, and then went over to get supper. Jim was drunk again by now, sporting a new blue shirt, and had a few dollars from money he'd got from Kennedy.

"You'da thought," he chuckled to Ned, "that I was astin' for his life blood, way he looked at me spendin' my money so quick. I told him it was my own damned dinero, that I worked hard for it, an' if he didn't want to lemme have some in advance I'd go get another job."

"You better sober up, Jim," Ned said quietly. "The dance will be starting at the school house in about two or three hours. You don't want Ruth to see you like this, boy. She's a good kid—we were all kids together, you know it. She's your girl and you oughta treat her better'n this."

"Awww, Ned, now dammit don't you start preachin' to me," his pardner protested. "Any gent's entitled to a little fun when he works as hard as we do. And ever' time I got over to see her she's always rompin' on me like you are. It'll be all right after we get married. Soon's we get that house fixed up on the homestead I'm bringin' her right down there as the missus. We can take the front room an' you can rig up a bunk in the kitchen the first year, till we get goin'."

"Sure, sure," Ned soothed him.

HE LEFT Stannifer with the latter's promise not to drink anymore, and went straight back to the lumber yard. There he put in an order for enough lumber to build a big lean-to, and the hurt in him was deep. He'd always been in love with Ruth Monroe, whose people lived a few miles west; farming and running a few head of cattle on the side. She was eighteen and the prettiest girl in the country; but when he was around her Ned somehow felt ill at ease. It always had been that way in her presence, particularly when Jim was there; Jim tossing his flaming red locks, laughing and joking and telling her how much he loved her.

The school house lay about a quarter of a mile due west of town, and by the time the music began tuning up there was a pretty good crowd present. Ned hadn't

been able to find Jim. Somebody had said he was drinking in town with Poke McCauley. Ned rode over and swung down, tieing his horse's reins to Bo-Bo's saddlehorn among the horses and buggies out by the cottonwoods. He hung his gunbelt over his own horn, slicked down his hair with a comb, and went toward the dance.

A man offered him a drink from a bottle several were drinking from in a little group not far from the front door. Ned said, "Thanks, Tom. I got to play nurse to Jimmie tonight. He's celebrating payday."

That one brought laughter from the group; knowing laughter. Word already had got around town that young Jim Stannifer had blown his wages and was on a tear. Ned let his lips tighten in a grimace and went toward the front door. The music had started up and about the first couple he spotted was Jim and Ruth. Jim didn't appear to be too drunk. He had the girl close in his arms, laughing and talking in her ear, and Ned could see the brightness in her eyes as she looked at the handsome, devil-may-care face and flaming red hair. Not a girl in the country could resist Jim Stannifer.

They floated by and Jim grinned at his pardner. "Come on, stick-in-the-mud," he called. "Grab a heifer and bulldog 'er."

"Hello, Ned," Ruth smiled and he nodded, something tight in his throat when he looked at her, knowing that he was just a clod-hopping cowpuncher who didn't fit in at anything except working cattle.

He considered it wrong to feel the way he did about her, for Jim was his pardner, and it was pretty well understood around the country that Jim and Ruth were going to get married someday. Her parents had made them promise to wait two more years. Ned stood there, his eyes on the straight, supple figure, the pitch black hair of her French ancestors, the lovely face, flushed and happy. Maybe, Ned thought, it was best after all. Jim was a good kid; they didn't come any better; and any man probably figured he had a right to get out and kick up his heels a bit in his younger years. All Ned had to do was stand by and sort of look after him until he settled down and got married. Once that was done, then everything might be all right.

The music ended. Ned still stood there, unaware that his tall, saddle hardened frame was six feet in height, that what he lacked in Jim's handsomeness he made up in solidness and integrity. He heard a voice next to him. The Old Man's.

"What's the matter with you, boy? I've been standing here watching for the past ten minutes. Every gal in the place has her eye on you, and you too dumb to know it. Git out there and dance!"

Ned said, grinning awkwardly, "I sorta like to let 'em get warmed up first."

He told the Old Man about the supplies he'd bought to fix up the homestead place, and asked for the ranch wagon to haul them over the next day. Jim had danced two straight with Ruth and now they came over, arms around each other's waists. Poke McCauley stood lounging in the doorway, his hat still on.

"Come on, you old sour-faced maverick, an' dance with my girl," Jim grinned jovially. "I'm goin' outside an' cool off."

"Jim!" Ruth blushed. "He doesn't have to dance with me unless he wants to."

That seemed to settle it. The musicians had struck up a waltz and Ned Burns took the girl in his arms. They floated off across the floor, newly sprinkled with corn meal to make it slick, seats ranged around the walls. She leaned back and looked at him, her eyes bright with happiness.

"Jim told me, Ned," she said. "About the place you two have got and the cows you and him bought today. I think it's wonderful. I gave him the very devil about spending a little money for drinking this afternoon. But I really didn't mean it, Ned. As hard as you two work he has to have a little fun on payday, so I really don't mind him having a few this afternoon."

NED went outside. Jim was talking and laughing with Poke McCauley

out by the horses. They were drinking from a pint bottle.

The dance broke up at four the next morning, and when they all got back to the ranch at seven Ned Burns had to help his pardner out of the saddle. Jim reeled, tried to step backward, and sat down with a foolish, grinning expression on his freckled face.

"Boy, am I pie-eyed!" he laughed. "Help me up, Ned. Lemme git in my bunk. It's Sunday an' I'm gonna sleep for a week."

Ned helped him in, ate breakfast, and then harnessed up the ranch team to the big wagon. He went in town, got the lumberman to open up and let him load, and drove back and on to the homestead. Pride came to his eyes as he pulled up in front of the broken down shanty. The kitchen roof had tumbled in and dirt was piled three feet inside. There was a pack rat's nest of sticks in one corner. But the wall looked solid, and there was a fair to middling shed and brush corral out back. The creek bed over which he had crossed was dry now, the cottonwoods drooping from lack of moisture. But in normal years there would be water, there would be green grass growing in the meadow, and someday, Ned promised himself, he and his pardner would have a big home there.

Ned unloaded and returned to the ranch, getting in after eight o'clock that night. He unharnessed, watered and fed the team and went to the cook shack to get a cold bite to eat. Bo-Bo, thirty-five and bow-legged, came in.

"How's Jim?" Ned grinned, tired and stifling a yawn.

"Still asleep," Bo-Bo said, shaking his head. "I sure hate it, Ned, him losin' to Poke, after all you two been plannin' for a year. Poke cheated him, Ned. I saw it. But when I tried to tell him so he started to climb my frame. I'm glad you grabbed that crooked saddle tramp's gun, boy. If you hadn't, he'd be on the run from the sheriff an' I reckon I'd be stretched out on a slab in town. Poke's mean, Ned. Watch out for him."

"I intend to," Ned said.

He ate, went in, looked at Jim flat on his back in the bunk with his clothes still on, and went to bed.

With the cattle shipped things slacked up around the ranch for a while, and though Ned Burns hated to lose the time in wages, he and Jim Stannifer took off and went to work on the cabin. They shoveled out the dirt, caved in the rest of the kitchen roof, and replaced it with new plank, then put on more sod. They sweated and swore and grinned at each other, but there was pride in every stroke of the hammer as the first two rooms were made habitable. At the end of a week the inside was whitewashed spic and span. The Old Man had some broken down furniture he'd stored out in the harness shed. He gave it to them, including a rusty cooking stove, and two weeks later, one evening at dusk, Ned Burns and Jim Stannifer lit the first lamp and cooked a first meal in their own home.

CHAPTER III

Poke Horns In

TEXAS winter set in with its hard rains followed by northers that slashed down across the prairies and drove cattle into gullies and down among the cottonwoods by the creek for protection. The creek was up and running normally again now, and the two of them swore roundly every time they had to cross it, which was once or twice a day.

"That just goes to show you what a fool homesteader will do who don't know the country," Jim shouted, head tucked down against the knife edged wind. "If the fool had had any sense, he'd a built on this side of the creek so's he wouldn't have to cross it every time he went to town. Believe me, pardner, when we git to be big cattlemen that new house is gonna be over here where I won't git my feet wet every time I ride in for a sack of tobacco."

"Right!" Ned shouted back, and the two

forced their reluctant mounts into the icy waters.

By now only one of them was working at the ranch for the Old Man. They took turns, a week each, until the Xmas norther hit and Jim, working at the big ranch, went to town to see Ruth. He was gone two weeks. Ned rode day and night, working the sixty-three head of cattle that had brought them in a crop of fifty-one new calves. The wolves pulled down three of them and two of the weaker cows froze to death. The snow came down day after day, fine, like grains of white sand, piling up three-foot drifts in one of the severest storms in many years.

Ned rode bundled up, fighting the wind and snow, and then the terrible rains. He grew haggard and gaunt-eyed from loss of sleep and not much food. He didn't have time to cook, and there wasn't much left to cook. The creek was a swollen torrent more than a hundred yards wide in which dead cottonwoods floated down, turning and twisting in the grip of the tumbling water. He saw riders and sometimes they waved to him and he waved back. Evidently the Old Man was telling Bo-Bo and the others to keep an eye on him. So Ned signaled that he was all right and drove on, riding the three horses to exhaustion.

But he pulled through. Three days before the creek began to subside he came in one afternoon and saw a buggy on the opposite shore. It was more than a hundred yards away, but he had no difficulty in recognizing Jim Stannifer and Ruth. Jim was grinning, that much Ned could see at even the distance separating them. He shouted something. Ned shook his head.

"Can't hear you!" he bellowed.

Jim shouted again, pointing at Ruth. Then the one word came faintly above the roar of the waters.

"Married!"

Ned waved back, grinning, and suddenly he was a little glad in spite of the pang that hit him. He'd thought Jim had been in town on a Xmas drunk, and he'd been a little sore at the way his pardner had left the bulk of the storm work on his shoulders. Now Ned Burns wasn't sore anymore. Jim had been courting Ruth. He'd married her. It explained everything. Things were all right now!

The cattle had come through in fair shape and Ned let them go. He got the tools out of the house and went to work with the lumber that was left. By the time Jim Stannifer drove his bride across the creek a week later there was a new, yellow lean-to of raw pine built against the kitchen.

Jim jumped down out of the buggy, helping his flushed wife to the ground. He ran over and wrung the other's hand. "Boy, am I glad to see you! It's good to get home, and just look what I brought along to cook for us! Yep, I'm an' ol' married man now, son."

Ned took off his hat and shook hands with Ruth. He hadn't had a haircut in over two months, and he hadn't shaved in nearly three weeks. He was ragged, gaunt from the terrible grind against the storm, his boots run down at the heels.

"Ruth, I'm happy for you both," he said simply. "I hope—"

"Hey, look, honey!" Stannifer shouted, pointing. "The modest old dawg has done gone and built himself a room on the opposite end of the house from us! Goin' to be exclusive from us married folks."

He had seemed to take it for granted that they would have the bigger bedroom and not the lean-to. "A sort of present for the newlyweds, the bedroom, I mean," Ned finished lamely.

"Why, that's grand of you, Ned," the girl said. "Jim's a pretty lucky man to have a pardner like you."

"And a wife like you, honey," was the grinning reply from her new husband.

They began to unload the hack, piled high with her personal belongings and a few odds and ends of furniture. They moved into the big bedroom on the south end of the house, and in a week you wouldn't have known the place. Curtains magically appeared at windows, tablecloths, new silver knives and forks, and a hundred other things she'd received as wedding gifts. Her family had donated

more furniture; and with the promise of a good calf sale that fall, they went in town to the store and bought more, Ruth doing the selecting.

THE cabin became a home, though from that day on Ned never entered the bedroom he had shared with Jim. It belonged to the two of them in there now. Sometimes he caught the girl's eyes studying him, and it made him all the more uncomfortable. He withdrew more into himself, going to his lean-to immediately after supper. He threw himself harder into work. A couple of times that spring Jim got drunk. He stayed away three days that time, leaving Ned Burns and his wife alone in the cabin.

When he returned, the pardners had their nearest thing to a quarrel. Ned was furious.

"What in God's name do you think the neighbors will say?" he said savagely. "Me alone in this house for three nights with your wife? They're bound to talk. Jim, you can't do it to your wife! I don't give a damn for myself, but you're not doing right by her."

"I know, Ned. Aww, darn it, I just didn't think. By the way, she ain't never found out yet, about me not ownin' any of the cattle, has she?"

"She hasn't because they're half your'n. You do own them. We're pardners. Now go on in and tell her you're sorry. I'm going over and see the Old Man."

He saddled and rode over, and the Old Man told him that after the calf round-up in the spring the foreman was quitting. He asked Ned Burns if he wanted the job. Ned told him, "You bet I want it."

For he knew that he couldn't stay there in the cabin anymore. He loved Ruth; he couldn't help it, even while cursing himself at the injustice he was doing his pardner; but there was nothing to do about it except get away. Then, too, the foreman's job paid one hundred a month and a cabin, and they could use that money during the coming year to pay bills, fix up the place little by little, and hope to buy some more stockers from the proceeds of the calf crop.

Veal would be high this year, Ned knew, after the drouth. It was better to sell off every year and take quick profits than hold them until they became three or four-year-olds. They didn't have the time and the range for that, Jim and himself. But things looked good.

Ned went back to their place; and when he told them about the new job and that he'd be moving over to the ranch in a couple of months, he saw the strange look in Ruth's eyes as she shot him a glance, and the thought that she might suspect his secret with a woman's instinct chilled him to the marrow.

"The way I figure it, Jim," he said. "We got three years to prove up on this homestead before it's our'n for keeps. But with what we can buy this fall in the way of stockers we'll have to have more range pretty soon. The four sections we leased from Hank will run at most one hundred fifty head a year, and that's grazing pretty close. But I found out there's eight more sections can be leased just west of there on the old T-Cross's original boundary. So if I take this job with the extra money you'll make helping with the spring roundup, we can make it. That'll give us twelve sections under lease, plus the home place."

"I think it's grand, Ned," Ruth exclaimed softly. "You and Jim are on your way, if you have luck and don't try to expand too fast. But I'm happy for you two."

"Us three," Jim grinned, pulling her down on his knee and kissing her there in the kitchen. "We're all in this together, honey. Equal pardners."

During the weeks that followed when the winds and sandstorms of early spring began Ned worked harder to do all he could at the ranch before leaving. They had a wagon Ned had traded for and a borrowed team from the ranch. With it they cut wild China poles for corrals—poles that would last thirty years. The Old Man was paying them to ride the line separating the two places and keep his cattle back north of the boundary and theirs south.

That paid better than to separate in the

cut-out when they made the spring round-up. Thus Jim, who groaned every time he had to pick up an ax, did the riding and drew the pay while Ned Burns cut and hauled the poles. And he could always figure that when he came in with a load Ruth would be out with hot coffee and a bite to eat for him. He kept his distance, hiding his feelings that way, not realizing that it had made him completely aloof. He had hurt her badly because she thought he resented her presence.

"Ned," she asked one day when he came in for a drink of water in the afternoon, "why don't you like me? Is it anything I've done?"

He stared at her in surprise. "Why—of course I like you, Ruth. We were all kids together."

"Well—I kind of—thought that perhaps you were resentful because I'd taken Jim away from you," she answered with a slight falter in her voice.

"You've been good medicine for Jim—the best there is, Ruth," he told her. "And you've made a home for us here. I'm just busy wrestling with the problems of the place and how to get ahead."

SHE placed a slim hand on his arm and looked up. "I'm glad, Ned. I'm happy again now that I know. And I need you very much, Ned. Jim is taming down fast and getting over his wildness, but there's still some left. Help me hold him down another couple of years, Ned. Just two more and he'll be all right."

He said that he would and went out.

The work went on. Riders dropped by now and then. The Old Man came over occasionally to sit his horse and puff his cob pipe and look at the new corrals Ned was building. Ruth's folks came and brought two dozen laying hens and a pig. Ned had already purchased a milk cow. Somebody was always dropping by every few days, and in the cabin now so neat and clean they found good food and a welcome and friendliness. Now and then some lonesome cowpuncher wouldn't be able to keep his hungry eyes off Ruth's lovely face and the soft swell of her throat, and then Jim Stannifer's eyes would cease their laughter and become hot with rage.

Thus Ned wasn't long in discovering that Jim was violently jealous; that is, of everyone except his pardner.

One afternoon shortly before Ned was to pack up, take over his duties as Lazy K foreman, he drove up in back of the corrals and saw a horse by the corner of the cabin. Ned was thirsty from the work and went down. He stepped inside and saw Poke McCauley.

The lanky, mustached rider was sitting easily in a chair by the kitchen table. Ruth was working at the stove preparing the evening meal. She had to step close by him each time, and the man's bold eyes were devouring her. If ever a woman's face registered relief, Ned saw it in hers as he entered the kitchen.

Ned nodded to her, said casually, "Howdy," and went to the water pail. He drank thirstily.

"How's the cattle business?" McCauley asked.

Ned said, "All right," and rolled a cigarette, and he waited, without speaking.

McCauley finally cleared his throat. "I was lookin' fer Jim. Knew you was workin' up there in the Chinas but didn't figger he was with you."

"If you knew that much," Burns said curtly, "then you knew he's riding line less than two miles north of here. You'll find him there."

Poke McCauley got up, a slight sneer beneath the droopy blonde mustache. He went out and got on his horse. Ned saw the neck and stopper of a quart bottle of whiskey sticking out of a saddlebag.

He had been intending to go back and load up another batch of the cut poles. Now he went out and unharnessed and went to work on the corrals. He was busy when, two hours later, McCauley and Jim returned. When he heard loud voices from the house he went down.

Ruth was crying, face buried in her hands. Jim, his face liquor flushed, was in a rage. He wheeled as Ned came in.

"So you're still around, eh?" he grunted.

"What's eating you, Jim?" Ned asked him.

"You know damn well what's eatin' me, Ned! You an' my wife. Poke says you wanted to git rid of him so's you two could be alone. He says he practically saw you kissin' her—"

"Aw, now wait a minute, Jim boy, I didn't exactly say that—" Poke began.

And then Ned hit him. He hit him so hard that Poke McCauley's lanky frame glanced off the wall and crashed over a chair, splintering it. Ned was on him in cold fury, jerking the man to his feet. He slammed him back against the wall and drove one savage blow after another into McCauley's blood smeared face.

Then he dragged him to the door and threw him out. "There, damn you," he panted, his eyes blazing. "Now just go ahead and try to throw that gun! Throw it!"

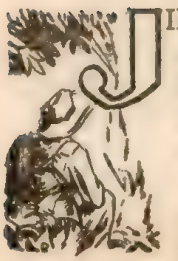
But Poke made no move to unsheath his pistol. He got stumblingly to his feet and wiped away blood running from his nose and mouth. He picked up the hat Ned had tossed after him.

"From now on," Ned Burns told him in cold fury, "this place is posted against you, you lying yellow dog. McCauley, if I ever catch you on this land again I'll kill you on sight."

McCauley brushed his hat against his chaps and put it on. Then, still wiping at the red smear now all over his hand and sleeve, he went to his horse and loped away. Ned Burns went back inside and, tight-lipped, began bathing the knuckles of his right hand.

CHAPTER IV

The Marker



JIM STANNIFER was still drunk, but he was shamefaced now. Ruth came over to the basin with a teakettle of hot water and poured.

"Aww, Ned, I—I shouldn't a-blowed up that way," he finally mumbled. "I always knew there wasn't anything between you an' Ruth. Shucks, we're pardners, ain't we? It was just that the way Poke said it—"

"Forget it, Jim," Ned said curtly. "It wasn't you. It was the liquor talking. You'd better go in and sleep until supper. You'll feel better."

Jim did so without a word, appearing glad to escape from a situation in which he had let liquor make a fool of him. He disappeared back of the curtained doorway and the bed creaked. He was soon snoring.

Ruth looked at Ned Burns. "I'm terribly sorry, Ned," she said gently. "He didn't mean it."

"I know," Ned replied; but he knew that the suspicion was irrevocably planted in Jim Stannifer.

He said, "I saw the Old Man a couple of days ago. The foreman ain't feeling so good. He wanted me to come over as soon as I could get away. I figured to go next week, but I guess I'll go on over tonight. Jim'll be all right when he sobers up. He'll come begging you to forgive him. And you'll do it, too, of course."

"Yes," she said in a low voice. "I will. He's my husband and I love him in spite of his wildness. No woman could fail to love a man like him, in spite of his faults."

"He'll straighten out in a year or so," Ned said.

He packed his warbag and got his bedroll out of the built-in bunk. His shirts and socks were folded on a shelf in a corner, washed clean and carefully mended. Ruth did it during his absence from the cabin. He could never get over the feeling of awkwardness at coming in at night and finding everything spic and span in the crude lean-to.

He rode away while Jim was still asleep, and took over as foreman for the Old Man the next morning. They were getting ready for the spring roundup, and Ned Burns quickly found out that it was a sixteen hour job. He drove himself from before daylight until after dark; he lost weight and became still more lean and hard. His gaunt six feet were all bones and no meat. But there was respect in the

eyes of the men who worked for him, and there was respect in the eyes of Ed Harber, the banker, when one afternoon while in town to help get supplies, Ned Burns went in and asked for a loan to take over the lease on eight sections of land.

"Me and Jim have over a hundred head now, including the calves we figger to sell off for veal this fall," Ned explained. "We can pay you the money for the lease when we sell this fall, and use the rest of it to buy more stockers."

"I see," Harber said thoughtfully, his keen, shrewd eyes on the gaunt, unshaven face. "Tell you what I'll do, Ned—if it was you alone, you could have the money on your note, but I'll take a mortage on the cattle in case something might happen to you. Maybe an accident. Poke McCauley's been talking."

"About what?" shot back Ned Burns, feeling himself go cold. If it was about Ruth he'd go over and kill the man on the spot.

"Just talking," was the unruffled reply.

"Why? How?"

"Seems your pardner got a little too many drinks in him a few weeks back an' said as how you'd licked Poke out in your cabin. We wondered how he got so beat up. Poke claims you just got sore because he gave Jim a few drinks, and then beat him up. Says he's going to square accounts. I'd watch him, Ned. He's not a brave man, but he's got cunning, like a coyote. That makes him more dangerous."

"I've got my eyes open."

"All right, son. I'm glad you've got your eyes open. Get your lease on the eight sections fixed up and have Jim come in and co-sign the note. Need any extra money?"

Ned Burns shook his head. "Thanks, Ed, but we can't risk expanding too fast. Just enough for the lease. If we get in a bind, I'll come back."

"You'll come to the right place," was the reply. "Good luck, son. Just watch yourself when you're riding alone."

Ned watched himself. People were saying that he was the best foreman Harry Kennedy had ever had, and that Ned Burns was a man to keep an eye on. He was coming up. Ned himself was too busy to listen. He saw Jim but once a month now, and Jim finally came protesting. The spring roundup would be over that week, if they had luck, and Jim was working with the crew.

"What's the matter with you, Ned?" he asked. "I know you're busy, but you never come over and see me and Ruth anymore. Hell's fire, it's your own home, you blamed hard headed maverick."

"I'm too busy. You worked this range enough to know what a foreman's job is. But I'll get over Sundays now and then to check bills and expenses. We've got to cut corners, Jim. If we can make it this year we'll be a little more solid on our feet."

Jim went back to the herd and the Old Man, who'd been right along with the outfit, came riding up.

"How's it goin', son?" he asked, striking a match to his corncob pipe. He was old, humped, shaggy headed and gray, but he looked contented.

"All right, I guess, boss," Ned grinned, wiping at his dusty face.

In the distance the herd was bawling and milling while riders from four different outfits went in and cut out strays bearing their owners' brands. When that was done, and the strays driven to their home ranges, the real work of branding and marking Lazy K calves would begin.

THE old Man looked at his foreman. "Looks like some of your'n finally slipped through after all," he remarked, puffing away at the corncob. "The boys found four head and cut 'em out. There they go now."

Ned looked. Two riders were hazing four cows with calves south toward the homestead boundary.

The foreman's lips tightened. Jim must have been slipping off to town again when he should have been riding line and cutting China poles in his spare time. Bo-Bo came loping by on a fresh horse from the remuda corral and the foreman signaled him down. Bo-Bo loped over and hauled up.

"Take over for me for a while," Ned Burns ordered. "I'll be back before the cutout is finished. Got some cows to drive home."

"All right," Bo-Bo grinned. He was gone with a wave of his hand.

"I'll just ride along with you," the Old Man said. "Gettin' kinda old to help with the work, but too damn restless to set a cayuse an' do nothin' but smoke a pipe. I'll help you, Ned."

They went down and relieved the two riders, sending them back to the herd. Ned looked at the four cows—and then suddenly he felt ice rising with a cold clutch at his stomach. One of the cows was a "marker"—a cow with such peculiar coloring there could be no doubt any rider seeing her once wouldn't recognize her again. Ned shot a sidewise glance at Harry Kennedy, his boss. The Old Man was puffing complacently on the odorous corncob as though he hadn't noticed a thing. But someone had marked four of his cows with the Burns-Stannifer brand.

Ned Burns was a man who faced facts. It had been his creed, it still was, and he faced them now. He found his voice.

"Jim and me were figgering on buying another twenty head from you this year," he got out, his voice sounding strange and far away. "We'll still buy them. I'll pick out twelve head this fall, since these four already have spring calves."

The Old Man was now puffing furiously on the corncob. There was a hidden twinkle in his eyes his foreman failed to see.

"Why, that'll be fine, Ned," he said. "Guess Jim just made a mistake an' branded the wrong critters."

Ned looked at him levelly. "It was no mistake, Harry. Jim has worked this ranch with me for nearly five years. If he was going to blot a brand he wouldn't pick a marker. Jim knows cattle."

"Hmm. Poke McCauley?"

"I don't know," Ned said helplessly. "I guess so. But whoever did it, Harry, there's Jim's wife. She mustn't know anything. So we'll take the eight head here and buy twelve more this fall."

"That's fair enough," Kennedy said, and again the hidden twinkle was in his old eyes as he looked at his young foreman.

They went back to the herd.

IT WASN'T until three days later that Ned got his pardner, who had come over to work on roundup, alone. They were halfway through branding and marking, and the weather still held. The two men met in a draw, where Jim Stannifer had gone after a wild cow that had broken from the main herd.

"I missed her," he said with a grin as he hauled his sweat streaked horse to a halt. "That she-devil got clean away with the purtiest yearling calf you ever saw. Got a smoke?"

Ned handed over the makings. "Seen Poke McCauley lately?" he asked casually.

"Poke? What the devil would I be seeing Poke about?" He had paused, tobacco sack and papers in hand. The fingers had begun to tremble a bit.

"I just sort of figgered," was the calm reply, "that you'd seen him within the last ten or fifteen minutes—maybe the reason that cow got away. You were talking to him, Jim."

"What the hell gives you that idea?"

"The whiskey on your breath, Jim. You can smell it at twenty yards. Where is he?"

"Aww, now wait a minute, Ned. I ain't—"

"Where is he?" slashed out the foreman.

"Well," growled Jim Stannifer sullenly, "for the past couple of weeks he's been stayin' in your lean-to down at the place. You didn't need it anymore—"

"Good God!" cried out the foreman. "What kind of a fool are you, Jim, to let that man stay around your wife while you're gone?"

"Poke's all right," defended the other pardner. "He's plumb sorry about that fight an' he wanted to prove he was a right gent. I laid the law down to him an' he said he'd protect her with his life. I feel a lot better with him there, what with

all these strange saddle tramps hitting the roundup wagons for meals."

Ned Burns shook his head. "It's no use, Jim. The Old Man spotted those four cows with our iron on them, all with unbranded calves. One of them was that brindle marker with the white arrow head on her left flank. We've both seen her a hundred times during the past four years. So have all the other boys. Why did you do it, Jim?"

"I didn't brand that marker!" Stannifer cried out, thereby establishing his own guilt. "I tell you, Ned, I didn't!"

"I don't think you did either," was the stony reply. "It was too crudely done, as though it might have been deliberate. I think Poke McCauley did it to get back at me. But there can't be any doubt about the other three. It was a good job with a running iron, Jim. Your only mistake was in going to town to drink and letting them drift over the line, instead of keeping them holed up in canyons somewhere for a year or two. Why did you do it, Jim?"

"Why? Why in the hell not? It was your cows started our place. It was you this and you that. Every time I sneak—I went into town to have a drink or get away from that place that was drivin' me crazy all I heard was Ned Burns did this and Ned Burns did that. I wanted to hold up my end. I worked four years for the Old Man, and earned twice what he paid me. He's got plenty of cows—and you yourself said we had to get ahead as fast as possible—"

"You damned fool! I'll bet you were loaded up to the gills on Poke McCauley's whiskey when you stole those cows. Jim, we're pardners, but Ed Harber keeps saying there's a line between friendship and business. I'm going him a bit further. There's a line between playing a game on the square and cutting the corners."

"What did the Old Man say?" asked young Stannifer anxiously.

"I just told him we'd buy the eight head and add to the twenty we expect to get from him this fall. He thinks maybe Poke McCauley had a hand in it to get back at me."

"Why, sure he did. That's fine, Ned; that makes it swell. Now I can go back and face him all right." He rode over closer and stuck out his hand, the cigarette forgotten. His breath still reeked with whiskey. "Ned, I give you my word I'll never throw my—our iron on another man's cow."

"That's good enough for me, Jim. Now you'd better get back to the herd. We'll get that yearling next spring. And, by the way," he called as young Stannifer reined off, "you'd better tell Poke McCauley that I'll be needing that lean-to and he'll have to find another place to stay."

"You coming back with me an' Ruth?"

"No. But you tell Poke anyhow. He knows what'll happen if I catch him there."

CHAPTER V

The Gray Wolf

THEY finished the roundup that spring in pretty good shape. The chuckwagon returned to the ranch. The men from the other ranches disappeared. The branded and marked calves went back to the ranges where they were born, to let hot iron and knife cut heal, while the big range bulls stood sleepily in the shade of mesquites and lazily switched at the flies, masters of their domain. Work at the ranch slacked down except for the erecting of a few windmills and putting in necessary stretches of fence.

Ned Burns, the foreman, had a little more time on his hands to go into town now and then and to visit the homestead. He saw Ruth, and each time the pang hit him. She seemed to be getting thinner. The dark hair seemed to be darker, and the dark eyes appeared to be larger. She was more silent now, and Ned guessed that her husband wasn't spending too much time at home anymore.

He seldom saw Jim anymore. She made lame excuses that he was out riding, or

had gone to town for supplies. The foreman returned to the big ranch more disturbed than ever. And that was about the way matters stood the day a posse burned into the ranch on sweat streaked horses and said that two masked men had held up the bank in town and shot Ed Harber.

Sheriff John Sutters said Ed wasn't going to die; but they had trailed the gunmen down this direction, and the posse needed fresh horses.

"You come along with us, Ned," the sheriff said, while men were frantically saddling. "I'm swearing you in as chief deputy. They got an hour's head start on us and we need all the help we can get."

The Old Man was puffing on that corncob. His eyes said nothing. "Better go along, son," he said. "Ed's one of the best men in this country. We can't have anything like that happen to a good citizen. It's up to everybody to help the law keep the law. Sorta like Ed used to say, 'Friendship is all right up to a certain point, but business is business.' This is bad business, son."

"All right, Harry," Ned Burns said. "I've got a bay horse down home"— he felt a bit strange using the word—"that I'd like to get. He's the best you ever had on this ranch. I'll burn the breeze after him and pick up you boys' trail."

He ran out and saddled and drove south the three miles to where the creek showed up pellucid and placid among the cottonwoods, and he saw the neat cabin on the other side. He was out in the new China pole corral saddling when he turned and saw Ruth. She opened the gate and came toward him.

"Ned, what is it?" she whispered, her face white.

"Two men stuck up the bank in town and shot Ed Harber, Ruth. Not bad. He'll live. The sheriff swore me into the posse."

"Two men?" Her face was white. "Ned, do you think—"

"They were masked," he said. "They weren't recognized," and he knew this was a lie. One had been tall, the other red headed.

"I know," she got out, low voiced. "You don't have to make it easy on me. Poke came in late yesterday afternoon and got Jim to drinking. They rode off about dark. Oh, Ned, Ned! He's my husband! What am I going to do?" And then she was against him, holding to him for strength. "He's my husband and I love him."

"Just wait," he said. "There's nothing else to do but wait."

He swung up and rode out of the corral, cutting west over the prairies. He found the posse's trail at dusk that night, and caught them as they rode up and hallooed a small ranch house. A man stuck his head cautiously out of the door. He saw the star gleaming on the sheriff's shirt and came out.

"Seen two men heading this way, ridin' hard?" asked the sheriff.

"Nope," was the reply.

"Seen tracks of two horses hereabouts, made fresh?"

"Nope," again was the reply. "But I expect if you'd go down in my lower hoss pasture you'd find two played out cayuses somebody traded me fer two of my best saddle horses."

THERE was no use in trying to follow the trail any further that night. They camped down on the creek and rested their horses while they cooked up supplies bought from the rancher. Two hours before dawn they were on the run westward again, spread out in a three mile line. At ten that morning one of the possemen hit the tracks, the posse bunched, and they drove on. The trail led across Texas, crossed the line into Mexico Territory, and at each town where they stopped to get fresh horses the sheriff sent telegrams ahead to fellow officers. On the eighth day he came back from the railroad station to the restaurant where Ned Burns and the others were eating a much needed meal.

"Good news, boys," he said. "They rode into a place called Socorro and one of 'em got winged by the law waitin' for 'em. They swung north, but the posse headed 'em west again. We'll cut north, send riders to all towns where there ain't no

telegraph. Ned, you come with me."

He split his men in all directions, named a meeting point and date, and rode off with Ned Burns. They hit the higher country and rode all that day on fresh horses. At two that afternoon they dropped down among pines into a little settlement and pulled up at a livery.

"Sure," cried out the liveryman excitedly. "They left here on fresh horses not more'n fifteen minutes ago. Tall feller with a blond mustache an' a younger one with the reddest hair I ever seen? More hosses? You bet I got 'em—an' I'll tell you somethin' sheriff—they wanted the best I had, an' they had money to pay any price. I was plumb suspicious, so I give 'em a good lookin' gray that's so tenderfooted he won't go five miles. That tall feller got a buckskin so short winded it can't trot. Now I'll give you some real horses."

They got two rangy sorrels and drove out of town again. The liveryman hadn't lied when he said the animals had stamina. They had it. The long miles went by at incredible speed as the sheriff and a grim-faced Ned Burns loped, trotted, then walked by turns to let them blow. The chief deputy was thinking only of Ruth. She loved her husband, and now Ned Burns and the sheriff were closing in.

They spotted the fugitives too late to stop the shot that knocked the sheriff out of the saddle with a smashed shoulder. The gray was off to one side back of the rocks limping. The other horse was nowhere in sight. Ned Burns instinctively ducked as the second slug from Poke McCauley's rifle missed his head by inches. He spurred off into the timber to come in from behind. The sheriff was lying flat now, groaning and cursing his smashed shoulder, but throwing in a few shots from his six-shooter.

Ned swung down, slapped the animal he rode on the rump, and sent it trotting back whence he had come. He took his rifle and crawled forward under cover. He covered three hundred yards, eyes on the limping gray now grazing and a blown out buckskin standing with head low.

He heard Poke's voice say, gritting, "Just you wait. Just you wait! When this is over I'm going back there and beat that dirty yellow backed liveryman's head in with a gun an' then cut his body up in little pieces. The dirty, double-crossing—" and Poke McCauley cussed foully.

"There were only two of them," came Stannifer's voice in reply. "You got one, and if we can get the other, we'll have their horses. Then we can go on. You stay here an' hold 'em off while I slide down the rocks and see what I can do."

"All right," grunted back McCauley. "But leave the saddle bags here."

Burns saw his pardner slide into view; and he grew a little sick at his stomach as he realized Jim was coming straight toward him. He thought it ironical that of twenty men in the posse it had to be himself who was to corner the two fugitives. All during that long ride across Texas, the days and days in the saddle, he had hoped that out of the twenty men some of the nineteen others would now be in his place.

He waited until Jim was within twenty feet of him before he rose up in full view, gun in hand. "Jim," he called. "Jim, boy, drop your gun and surrender—"

Then Stannifer's gun was booming and Ned felt his own bucking against his hand. Hard. He heard a yell from above, jumped over his pardner's crumbling body, and went up after Poke McCauley. He got him, a lucky shot at nearly fifty yards. And when two riders from the original posse, plus a dozen men from the town down below the pines, came pounding up they found Ned Burns beside the body of Jim Stannifer.

They sent to town for a wagon to bring in the two dead men and the wounded sheriff. Ned went over to the hotel room where the officer lay on his bed, his right shoulder in bandages. He was drinking whiskey to kill the pain and swearing at the doctor who had fixed him up.

He looked at Burns.

"Well, son, I guess it's all over, and I'm sorry about how things got tangled up as far as you are concerned. He was your pardner. But people will remember—"

"Yes," Ned cut in slowly, "that's just the trouble, sheriff. People will remember. He was my pardner, and I can't go back and face his wife. You see, she loved him. So I'm going on. Tell Ed when he gets all right again to take enough cattle out of our little herd to pay off the note we—I owe him at the bank. Let the homestead go back to be filed on again. So long, sheriff, and say it to the Old Man for me. I'll make a start someplace else."

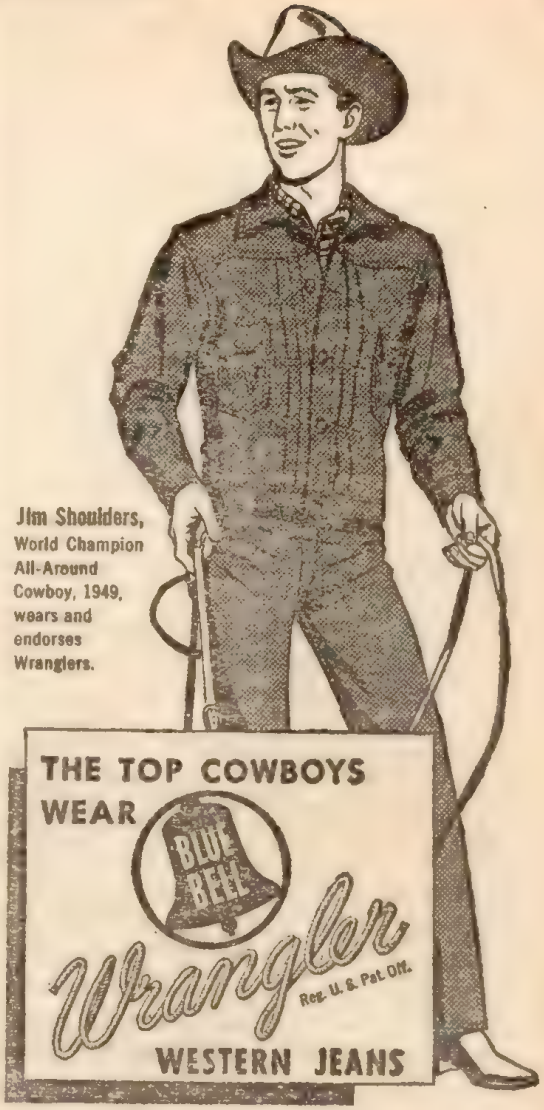
He was gone in the face of the sheriff's bellows for him to come back. He was seeing a woman's face, and what would be on it when they told her that Ned Burns had killed the husband she loved.

NED rode out of town that night and swung north. He summered on a Colorado range, working hard and not talking, and then drifting on into Montana. In Miles City he killed a man and a sheriff said it was self-defense. They called him "Slim" now, the only name they knew. Tall as ever, even more gaunt, there was something haunting in his eyes. He dealt cards in South Dakota, swung south to Wyoming Territory, and in three years time he grew older, more haggard, with always the face of a woman in front of him. The dancehall girls said he was ice, and soon gave up hanging around the games he dealt in Utah cow camps. He took a job as town marshal in Arizona, and killed three men in five months; and men began to say he was a killer.

But always he seemed to be circling back, always back, drawn by some magnet toward the place where the homestead had been, the place he and Jim Stannifer and a girl had turned into a home. It was the wolf coming back to his old stomping grounds, returning to the range where he was born. It drew him back, always back, until he couldn't stand it anymore; and one day he went back.

"I've got to have one more look," he said that late afternoon as he topped the rise, and saw the familiar pole corrals down below. "I've got to see the place again before I go on—and on."

[*Turn page*]



Jim Shoulders, World Champion All-Around Cowboy, 1949, wears and endorses Wranglers.

Many other Rodeo Cowboys Association champions wear Wranglers, including:

Todd Whatley, All-Around World Champion, 1947
Gerald Roberts, All-Around World Champ., 1948
Casey Tibbs, World Saddle Bronc Rid. Champ., '49
Bill Linderman, Runner-up World Champion, 1949

BLUE BELL WRANGLERS are tough and rugged. Made of heaviest 11-oz. Sanforized denim. Won't shrink out of fit. Styled by Rodeo Ben, custom tailor to top cowboys and ranchers. Men's and boys' sizes—**zipper or button front.** Women's Wranglers, 8 oz. wt., for trim figures, sizes 12 through 20. *Each* garment in Blue Bell's complete line of work and play clothes is guaranteed the best made, best fitting you can buy—*or your money back!*

BLUE BELL, Inc., Greensboro, N. C.
WORLD'S LARGEST PRODUCER OF WORK CLOTHES

He went down. The cabin was still there, but there was no smoke coming cut of the kitchen stove pipe as there always had been. The place looked deserted. He rode to the pole gate of the corral and swung down; tall and shaggy haired, something of the wild and the hunted about him. His clothes were worn, his saddle shiny. He carried a .44.40 in the saddle boot and two heavy guns were now belted around his hips.

A man's voice said, "Howdy, mister."

Ned Burns swung, hands slashing down and up, worn .44's gripped in his hands. It was nervous reaction. You couldn't kill a few men without knowing that someday you'd meet one of their friends.

Bo-Bo Johnson stood open mouthed.

"Ned!" he whispered. "Ned, you old sonuvagun. Man, but you scared me! Put up them guns, boy."

Ned Burns sheathed them, a little shaken. "What are you doing here?" he asked in a sort of choked voice. "But I know. You were always talking of homesteading your own place. I'm glad you got it."

"Homesteading hell!" snorted Bo-Bo. "I'm the foreman here now, workin' three men, you shaggy haired wildman. We been waitin' more than three years for you to come back. We're runnin' three hundred an' twenty head, all paid fer, an' she leased six more sections of land. She paid off them notes at the bank and kept on buyin' more cows. This is the neatest little ranch in Texas an' she's done it all."

"Where is she now?" whispered "Slim."

"Down there. Just got in from town about five minutes ago. She finished homesteadin', got the title to this place for you, an' she's just got back from town borrowin' money from Ed at the bank to buy two hundred head more, what with prices way up. Go on down there, boy. She's waitin' fer you. I think she's been waitin' about three lonely years now."

Ned Burns went down. He knew he looked like a tramp; he knew that his reputation had preceded him. But he had to go; something compelling was drawing him to that cabin door. He rounded the corner and crossed the familiar space to where the opening to the kitchen yawned before his eyes.

He saw her then, standing in the doorway; taller than he had ever known she could be. More than three years had changed her in some ways. She was more mature now. The eyes, so dark and fathomless, looked as dark as ever. He slowly removed his hat, feeling awkward.

"Hello, Ruth," he said, and essayed a smile.

"Ned," she whispered.

He went inside and she came close to him and why or how it happened he never was to know; he knew only that she was in his arms.

"The past doesn't exist anymore, Ned," she said. "I've waited and waited. I heard reports about you. But always I knew that someday the great gray wolf would come back to the place where he was born. I've been waiting for you."

"I've been waiting to get up enough courage to come back," he said. "I stopped in to see some friends. There's a sky pilot staying with them for a week. We could ride over there tonight. It's not too far, Ruth."

"No, darling, it's not too far."

Ned Burns and Ruth Stannifer were married that night in the home where she had been born. They came back to the cabin, and people who saw them during the following months forgot how things had been before. The Old Man came over in a few days, getting a little feeble now, and cussed them out because they hadn't waited so he could attend the wedding. When he died that winter, and called Ed Harber out to take his last will and testament, he said he'd been so busy building a big outfit he'd never had time to get married and had no relatives. So he wanted Ned Burns and his wife to have the Lazy K outfit, lock, stock and barrel.

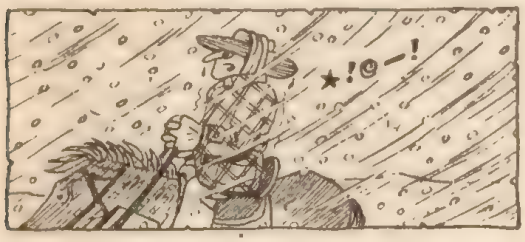
"It's like I told you, Ed," the Old Man said feebly to his friend, the banker, that last night he was to have life on this earth, "that boy has the makings of a good cowman."

The Cowboy HAD A WORD for it

by CHUCK STANLEY

WINTER WORK was occupying the men on the big Bar S Ranch, and they found it a bit more arduous than the sort of thing they were accustomed to doing in the other seasons of the year. Some of the stock was in the mountain meadows, sheltered by the tall trees and able to fend for itself because of a light snow-fall. Others were held in feeding pens close to the main ranchhouse and corrals. It was these that required attention. They had to have hay and feed laid out for them, and occasionally they required herding to bring them in the lee of a blizzard.

This took the mavericker and his young Eastern friend out in the saddle, bundled up in their heavy coats and with woolen mufflers down over their crushed Stetson hats to keep



their ears warm. They wore heavy mittens on their hands for warmth, instead of the skin-tight gloves that were worn in summer to keep the hands from being chafed or scarred by the catch-rope.

The two cowhands of the C Bar S were a strange contrast. One was craggy-jawed and firm-lipped, with a wealth of Western lore bound up in his brain behind his still-flashing blue eyes, the other young, enthusiastic, making his share of mistakes and enjoying the correcting. They had just spent one busy morning laying out hay, and were driving the empty hay sled up behind a line camp on the ridge of mountains about ten miles from the home. The line camp was a snug, two-room shack with a pot-bellied stove and a sturdy lean-to for the horses.

The old-timer went inside to start up the stove while the younker looked after the horses, blanketing them, and setting out a good feed of oats. Then he went inside, clapped some warmth into his own body with his gloved hands, wriggled off his gloves and held his palms toward the warming stove.

The old man studied the pinched features and curled fingers of his companion.

"I don't reckon," he remarked, "I've got much to worry about with that pencil and notebook of yours on this junket. Your fingers ain't going to be in no mood for writing for a long time."

The Arbuckle moved his fingers, chuckled, then brought his battered notebook from his pocket, settled down near the stove with a bread board on his lap and remarked, "You're not going to get off that easily. We've got a date to powwow about Wyoming. No side-stepping, no-sirree!"

The oldster shrugged, puttered around a bit until he had a pot of coffee on the fire.

"How do you reckon Wyoming got its name?" he asked.

"It's an Indian name, isn't it?" the pilgrim declared. "Means something like the great plains, or something of the sort, doesn't it?"

Tenderfoot and Old-Timer Powwow About Wyoming!

"That's one interpretation of it," agreed the mossy-horn, "but which Indian tribe do you figure tacked the name onto the Territory?"

The greener brushed his forehead with his pencil, tried to think of all the Indian tribes who roamed the great plains of Wyoming in the Old West, and finally remarked, "My guess would be the Shoshone!"

"That was one of the big tribes all right," the old man agreed. "But it wasn't Shoshone, nor was it one of the other eleven big tribes who lived in Wyoming—the Crow, the Blackfeet, Sioux, Ute, Bannock, Flathead, Cheyenne, Arapahoe, Modoc, Nez Percé and Kiowa. It's a Delaware Indian word and comes from Pennsylvania!"

"Pennsylvania?"

The pencil paused in mid-flight, and the young chronicler looked at the old, leather-hided cowboy as though convinced that he was making fun of him. But the tough, grizzled oldster merely smiled and said, "That's so, and you've probably heard tell of the valley yourself, if you know anything about your American history. It was the name given by the Delaware Indians to a valley in the mountains of northeastern Pennsylvania. The exact definition of the Indian word was 'the big flats,' and the original spelling of the Indian word was quite different from the Wyoming of today. It was 'Meche-weaming.' The Indians had a shortened form of this, 'M'chweaming.' The early settlers in Pennsylvania called it Wyoming."

"I remember that," declared the younker emphatically. "That was the scene of the Wyoming Valley Massacre in the Revolutionary War, when John Butler moved in with eleven hundred white Tories and Indians and wiped out the settlers who had come there from Connecticut. Did some of those same settlers come out to the Territory of Wyoming?"

"Nothing like that," the old-timer declared, stoking up his pipe and pouring out two cups of coffee. "I reckon Thomas Campbell the poet was responsible for the rash of Wyoming names that spread across the country, and came west of the Mississippi into Kansas and Nebraska before the Territory got its name. He wrote a poem about the Massacre you've mentioned, and called it 'Gertrude of Wyoming.'

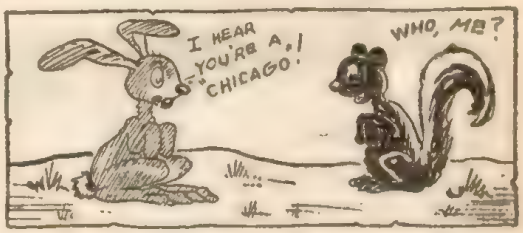
"The name became so popular that folks in Pennsylvania, New York and West Virginia gave it to counties. By the end of the Civil War there were ten Wyoming post offices, and they were spread all the way from Rhode Island to Kansas and Nebraska. The man who actually offered the name and stood up for it was James M. Ashley, who ran away from a Puritan home to go West in 1822 and spent a good many of his next thirty-six years there. In 1858 after being Governor of the Territory of Montana, General Ashley returned to his native Ohio and was elected to Congress."

"I remember him, all right," the younker declared. "He had a lot to do with the naming of Montana, Idaho, Colorado, Nevada, Dakota and Arizona, too."

"Keno," agreed the oldster, shifting his pipe to the other corner of his mouth, "but he didn't have an easy job with any of them. Now take Wyoming, for instance. There was a long debate on whether the Territory shouldn't have a name like Lincoln after Abraham Lincoln. But Charles Sumner who was one of Lincoln's greatest opponents while he was alive insisted that the name was not appropriate and suggested an Indian name. Considerable debate in Congress resulted, and Cheyenne, Shoshone, Pawnee and Sioux were all recommended and had their backers."

"Some of them even wanted to name it Platte, after the river, didn't they?"

"That's right. Cheyenne got a good kicking around. One Congressman got up and



said that he wouldn't approve of it because it meant snakes. The answer to that was that Chicago meant skunk, and no one in the Middlewestern metropolis appeared to mind it a bit. The name of Cheyenne was finally turned down when it was recalled that the word Cheyenne might well have been derived from the French word *chienne* meaning a female dog."

Senator Cameron of Pennsylvania, home state of the original Wyoming, put the final seal on the name of the Territory when he rose in the halls of Congress and said that his state was happy to supply a name for a new Territory where a good many Pennsylvanians had carved out their careers.

DOOM waits at Snake Bar

by GUNNISON STEELE

A flurry of shots, a rattle of hoofs—and the fight's on!

THERE was awe in Bobby Mace's wide, dark eyes.

"Three-to-one odds!" he breathed. "You mean, Chilcot, you stood up to three of the toughest gunslicks in Texas and salted 'em all?"

"Just two of 'em," Chilcot Horn admitted. "The other one turned tail, or I'd have got him, too. Shucks, button, that wasn't nothin'. I was marshal of Elwood then, a scrappy young rooster, and them three tried to run a woolybooger on me. Naturally it didn't work. Folks didn't call me 'Hurricane' Horn for nothin'."

"Wish I could have been there," Bobby sighed. "By grabs, Chilcot, you must've

Copyright, 1942, by Better Publications, Inc., and originally published in November, 1942, Popular Western

been a ring-tailed catamount back in them days."

"Had fourteen rattles and a button," Chilcot bragged. "All the other rattlers got their poison from me. Speakin' of rattlers, I remember the famous Murderin' Mex. He imitated a snake in every way except crawlin' on his belly. We had our showdown out in Bullhide Canyon, and me caught without my guns."

The curly-haired youngster fidgeted excitedly.

"And you captured him?"

" 'Course I did, after getting a bullet in my arm." There was a faraway look in Chilcot's faded eyes. "Those was ripsnortin' days, youngster, when I was a gun marshal in Texas. Reckon I was mebbe a shade slower'n greased lightnin' with a gun."

"Why don't you wear a gun now, Chilcot?"

The old man shifted uneasily, his eyes unable to meet the boy's.

"Well, I dunno. Reckon I just got sort of tired of trouble and killin'. I wanted peace, so I threw my guns away and come up here." Abruptly he changed the subject. "Your ma know where you are, button?"

"Why should she? I ain't a baby."

"She don't like for you to associate with me, does she?" Chilcot asked slowly.

Bobby flushed. "She says you tell lies."

"That ain't all she says I bet. And mebbe she's right, youngster. Your daddy's got a lot of cows and money. You want to grow up fine and clean, like Jim Mace, not shiftless and no good like me."

"You ain't shiftless and no good," Bobby denied fiercely. "You're a swell, brave gent, and I'd rather visit you than do anythin'!"

CHILCOT'S eyes sparkled and his scrawny shoulders lifted.

"I gummies, boy, you're plumb welcome to come, but your ma. . . " His voice faded scaredly. "Yonder she comes now!"

Chilcot Horn's shack was half a mile up the gulch from Kettledrum. Bobby Mace's spotted pony was tied nearby, and they'd been sitting on the rickety porch.

Bobby looked up and saw a horse and rider coming slowly along the trail. The rider was a slender, dark-haired young woman with tanned features that held pride and refinement. She rode up and halted her sleek mount, smiling down at Bobby.

Jim Mace, Bobby's father, was the biggest cattleman on the Kettledrum range. He'd married dark-eyed Sandra in Cheyenne and brought her to live in the big white house on the edge of town. Their whole world revolved around ten-year-old Bobby. They wanted to mold him after the pattern that was in their hearts.

"Having a good time, son?" Sandra Mace smilingly asked.

Bobby hitched at the belt holding his toy pistol.

"You bet, Chilcot was tellin' me about the time he wiped out Cougar Jack's gang down in Texas—"

"Sun's most down, button," Chilcot cut in hastily. "Reckon it's time for you to go home."

"Yes, it is," Sandra said. "Daddy'll be expecting us."

Obediently, partly sensing what lay behind this, Bobby went to his pony. The woman looked at Chilcot Horn then. She'd stopped smiling. Softly, not unkindly, she said:

"We love Bobby more than anything in the world. We want him to be honest, truthful, respected. I don't think he will be if he spends most of his time listening to boastful untruths, seeing the effects of intoxication and shiftlessness. Jim and I like you, Chilcot. Everybody does. But you can see how we feel, can't you?"

Chilcot's thin, bearded face was red. He shifted from one foot to the other, trying to say something, to agree with her. The words wouldn't come. Suddenly he turned, stumbled into the cabin and closed the door.

He sat there on his cot a long time, ashamed, thinking about what Sandra Mace had said. He felt no bitterness. Jim Mace was a square-shooter, and so was Sandra. They'd done a lot for him.

Sandra was trying to protect her boy. She hadn't meant to be stuck-up or unkind. And deep in his heart he knew that she was right.

Chilcot Horn realized he didn't amount to much. To folks on the Kettledrum range, he was just a broken-down old tramp who did odd jobs about town and the ranches to get money for food and the red-eye he craved. They knew he was deathly afraid of guns or violence of any kind. Dozens of times they'd seen him turn white and trembling from the sound of exploding guns, or flee from the sight of fist-fights.

They played tricks on him, like staging fake fights, or unexpectedly shooting guns near him. Without guessing the soul-shaking terror such things brought to him, they jeered at his stories and called him the biggest liar west of the Missouri.

But to Bobby Mace, Chilcot wasn't like that. Often the youngster would ride out to Chilcot's shack and listen, wide-eyed, as Chilcot bragged about the things he'd done. Seeing the awe and respect in Bobby's eyes made the oldster feel oddly confident, almost cocky. It made him forget momentarily how things really were.

He knew that a lot of folks said it was a shame for Jim Mace's kid to spend so much time listening to his fancy lies. But he hadn't looked at it that way. Now he admitted that maybe folks were right. He wasn't fit for a fine boy like Bobby to associate with. Next time the kid showed up, he'd send him packing straight home. . . .

BUT several days passed before Bobby rode up the gulch again. Chilcot did a few odd jobs about town. He had to eat and so did his scrawny old roan, and after that there wasn't any money left for red-eye. Chilcot was almost glad of that, for shame burned inside him whenever he thought of what Sandra Mace had said. But then he remembered what Bobby had said:

"I hate owlhooters. When I grow up, I aim to be a lawman, like you used to be, Chilcot. I just hope I can be as brave and swell as you are."

Then the old man would wish desperately that he could see the button.

One morning, after almost a week, Bobby rode along the gulch. From the way he kept looking back over his shoulder, Chilcot knew he'd slipped away from his mother.

"I been busy lately, and that's why I ain't visited you," the boy explained. "You reckon we could go for a little ride?"

"Fraid not, younker," Chilcot evaded. "Fact is, I'm pretty busy, too. I was just fixin' to start out on a important job, so I reckon you better hightail back home."

"I'll help you—"

"I'll likely be gone a day or two," Chilcot lied, feeling lonely and lowdown. "You better go on back."

"Okay, but I'll be back as soon as yuh're through with this important job," Bobby promised.

Dejectedly Chilcot sat on the porch and watched him ride back down the gulch road. This had been a hard job, and the next time it would be much harder.

He was about to go back inside when suddenly his head lifted, his scrawny body stiffening. The sound was faint, but unmistakable.

Gunshots!

"Likely some cowhands, lettin' off steam," he muttered.

But he knew it wasn't. The firing had a fast, continuous, fierce tempo, a tempo that Chilcot Horn understood. He got to his feet, shivering. The racketing gunfire came from the direction of town.

Abruptly, as though a valve had been turned, the gunfire stopped. Then Chilcot saw a thin plume of dust rise into the air and move swiftly toward him. Feeling cold and numb, he stood there and watched the approaching dust cloud, abruptly aware of the sound of hard-running horses.

Finally he saw the four horsemen pounding wildly along the trail that ran past the shack fifty feet away. The riders were spurring madly, looking back over their shoulders. Smoke was still curling

from the muzzles of the guns in their hands.

Realization rushed over Chilcot. These four were outlaws, and there had been a savage fight back there in town!

They were looking toward the cabin, wary-eyed. A big, hook-nosed man rode out in front. Seeing the guns, the naked violence and cruelty on the hard faces of the renegades, a chill chased up Chilcot's spine.

All at once Chilcot felt the chill turn to ice in his stomach. There were *five* riders! One horse was carrying double—a blocky, tow-headed rider, and a dark-haired, white-faced boy. Bobby Mace!

Bobby was savagely fighting the man that held him, trying to break loose. But when the cavalcade was even with the cabin, Bobby's dark, unfrightened eyes were riveted on Chilcot's scrawny figure. Above the thunder of hoofs the old man heard him pipe:

"Dang, dirty owlhooters got me, Chilcot! Do somethin'. Get a posse—"

THE tow-headed rider cuffed Bobby fiercely across the mouth. The gun muzzles swung toward the cabin. With terror yammering inside him, Chilcot stumbled back into the cabin and fell to the floor. He heard the blasting roar of guns, the *scream* and *thud* of seeking lead. At last it stopped, the hoofbeats faded, and there was silence.

Chilcot lay there a moment, weak, dazed, hoping desperately that this was only a nightmare. Then he got slowly to his feet, forced his trembling legs to carry him outside. The outlaws had vanished, along with the dust of their departure. There was only silence and the awful horror within Chilcot Horn.

The deadening fear of violence was gradually overridden by the knowledge that Bobby was in the hands of killers.

He started stumbling along the gulch toward Kettledrum. The town was in an uproar when he got there. The street was crowded and it seemed to Chilcot that everybody was talking at once. There was Sheriff Wyat Mann, Jim Mace and Sandra. Mace, a big, usually cheerful man, was tight-lipped and ominously quiet. Sandra was white-faced, but dry-eyed and calm.

Chilcot caught snatches of conversation.

"Lash Sundstrum and his outlaw gang gutted the bank and killed the cashier. It's sure a tight spot for Jim Mace and the sheriff."

Chilcot asked questions, but nobody paid any attention to him. He was just an old tramp who was scared to death of guns and fighting. They didn't understand that he'd rather die a dozen deaths than see harm come to Bobby Mace.

Adam Sutters, the livery man, was standing nearby. Chilcot plucked timidly at his arm.

"What happened?" he pleaded. "The button . . . Did they—"

"He was ridin' along the street just as the outlaws come out after robbin' the bank," Adam said, glad to find an audience. "The little devil jerked out his toy pistol and tried to stop 'em, so they grabbed him. Lash Sundstrum knew he was Mace's kid. That stopped the shootin'. Then Lash said for the sheriff not to put a posse on their trail, or nobody'd ever see the kid alive again.

"He said if nobody trailed 'em, they'd turn the button loose, unharmed, after they got a good start. Then they rode away, takin' the kid with them."

Chilcot edged through the crowd that pressed about the sheriff, Jim Mace and Sandra.

"They got us cold," Sheriff Mann was saying. "We raise dust on their back trail and they'll—"

Jim Mace's face was rocklike, giving no sign of the fierce emotions that were inside him.

"They killed a man," he said tonelessly. "They deserve to hang. It's your duty to uphold the law, Sheriff. Put a posse on their trail."

Loud protests arose on all sides.

"You gone crazy, Jim?" Sheriff Mann protested. "Sundstrum's a killer. He'll do what he said, if we follow 'em. I won't

do it. After the button's back, safe and sound, then we'll trail 'em down and tear 'em apart."

Others nodded agreement. Sandra said nothing. She stood as if turned to stone, a tragic figure, holding to her husband's arm. Finally Jim Mace's shoulders slumped and he silently nodded his head. They agreed to wait twenty-four hours before sending out a posse.

CHILCOT HORN turned, forlorn and forgotten figure, and trudged slowly up the gulch to his shack. He sat down on the steps, head bowed dejectedly, bewildered and numbed by what had happened. Partly he blamed himself. If he hadn't sent the button back home....But he had, and now Bobby was in a terrible predicament.

Tales of Lash Sundstrum's cruel, lawless deeds were told over all the Northwest. Half a dozen times he had made forays onto the Kettledrum range, swooping down on towns or ranches in quick raids and dashing back into the rough, forested hills that rimmed the northern end of the basin. Sundstrum and all his followers were killers, without mercy or human conscience.

Chilcot sat there on the porch, miserable and scared, but now his fear was for Bobby Mace, not himself. He knew that Sundstrum wouldn't turn Bobby loose, even if the posse obeyed his order. When the button had served his purpose, Sundstrum would kill him.

The thought made Chilcot get up and pace restlessly. Bobby had thought he was a great lawman, had liked to visit him and listen to the exciting tales he told. Lies, other folks said, but the funny part of it was that they weren't. Those tall tales about the big gunfights he'd had were true. Once he had been a town marshal and one of the deadliest gunmen in Texas.

In that three-to-one gunfight in the streets of Elwood, he had been shot to pieces and almost killed. He'd recovered, only to find himself a shivering, unnerved wreck with a soul-clutching fear of guns and violence. He wasn't really afraid of dying. It was more a shadowy, intangible horror inside that had driven him relentlessly for thirty years.

Only Bobby and maybe Jim Mace saw him as he actually was. To others, he was just a bum who swamped in saloons. Now the button was in deadly peril and only a miracle could save him. Once Chilcot's lightning guns would have made that miracle happen, but not now. He hadn't fired a gun in thirty years.

Chilcot kept seeing Bobby's white face, kept hearing what he'd said as he fought his captor:

"Do somethin', Chilcot!"

Bobby had believed those tales of bravery and gun prowess that Chilcot had told. He wouldn't expect a man who could do those things to sit and do nothing when his partner was in a jam. He'd believe then what folks said—Chilcot Horn was just a lying, bragging old fool.

Chilcot turned suddenly and went into the house. He was shaking, but his twitching face was grim.

He opened a dust-covered trunk, and took out a layer of clothes and stared at the long-barreled old Peacemaker beneath. Carefully avoiding it, he took another object from the trunk and put it in his pocket. Then, wiping cold sweat from his face, his legs feeling stiff and weak, he went outside and to the pole corral nearby.

That cold feeling was in Chilcot's stomach again as he saddled the scrawny roan. Determinedly, though, he mounted and rode along the gulch, away from Kettledrum. Fearful that he would weaken if he looked back, he goaded the roan to a gallop, following four hoofprints that were plain on the soft prairie after they left the trail a mile from Kettledrum.

He knew he was doing a wild, crazy thing in taking the trail of Lash Sundstrum's killers. But the hands of Jim Mace and the sheriff were tied. That left it up to him.

He rode on, trying not to think about what lay ahead, watching the dark, bris-

tling hills draw in closer. The outlaws weren't expecting pursuit. They'd only laugh if they could see the skinny, scared old man on an equally skinny bronc, galloping along on their trail.

IT WAS past mid-afternoon when Chilcot reached the base of the hills and rode up among the forested ridges and shadowy canyons. He had a pretty good idea of where the outlaws were headed for. Up there, deep in the hills, was the old ghost town of Snake Bar.

For a brief period, many years ago, Snake Bar had pulsed and teemed with roaring life. Then the vein of gold that a prospector had uncovered in a dry streambed petered out, and Snake Bar died as quickly as it had been born.

But its rotting shacks remained, a ghostly monument to the greed of the fighting men who had spawned it. Here at Snake Bar was good water, an excellent stopover in the hard ride over the hills. In Bobby Mace the outlaws would figure they held a trump card and they wouldn't be in a big hurry.

As the hills grew tougher and the sun sank down behind the purple slopes, Chilcot paused on a wooded slope overlooking the old ghost town.

The place had an eerie, hostile look. Weeds and rubbish clogged the single narrow street. A loose door banged in the chill wind. Ghosts seemed to parade among the frame buildings, swaggering, arrogant shades of men long gone. But the dim light glowing in a window of the town's biggest building was real enough. So were the voices Chilcot heard. And a man was moving along the street, carrying a bucket of water from the spring at the upper end of the street.

Sundstrum's renegades were bedding down for the night.

Chilcot's probing eyes saw no sign of Bobby. The button must have served his purpose, for by now it would be plain to the outlaws that no posse was following. Maybe they'd already—

Chilcot shook his head to clear it of such thoughts, then tried to decide what to do. Even if he had a gun and had the courage to use it, he was no match for four gun-slingers. But he had to do something. He *had* to!

Abruptly he urged the roan down the slope, then rode slowly along Snake Bar's weed-grown street, making no effort at secrecy. He heard a startled curse, saw two men run out of the lighted building and stand in the deep shadows, watching him. He knew they had guns in their hands. He could feel the cold, merciless probe of their eyes and the freezing breath of doom. . . .

But he rode on, stopping the roan a few feet from the two dim figures. One of them was Sundstrum himself, a huge, hawk-faced man. The other was gaunt, his face a gray splotch. They looked at Chilcot's scarecrow form and hefted their guns.

"Howdy, gents," Chilcot said cheerfully. "That light in old Snake Bar sure looked good. It meant human beings and maybe grub. My stomach's plumb glued to my backbone."

"You alone, old man?" Sundstrum flatly asked.

"Who'd be with me?" Chilcot chuckled. "Forty years I've—"

"What do you want here?"

"Why, just a place to bed down. I always put up at the Palace Hotel when I visit Snake Bar. I see you gents have took her over, but there oughta be room for one more."

The two outlaws looked at each other, still undecided whether to kill him.

"What are you doin' in the hills?" Sundstrum growled.

Chilcot had swung to the ground, draping the roan's reins over the rotting hitchbar.

"Why, lookin' for mineral. I got a camp over yonder a piece. I rode farther'n I expected to, and night caught me. I'm hungry as a grizzly."

"Snake Bar's pretty crowded tonight, old man. Maybe you better ride on."

"I seen Snake Bar foaled," Chilcot argued. "I seen men killed here on this street when gold was cheaper'n water. I

drank redeye in this building that would have killed a hydrophobia cougar. No, by grabs, I'm stayin'!"

HE SAW Sundstrum's hawk-face stiffen, expected them to shoot him down, as they'd shot the bank cashier. But the other killer laughed.

"Aw, let it ride, Lash," he said. "He's harmless. We'll let him cook us some supper and then figure out what to do with him."

After a ghastly moment of indecision, Sundstrum motioned Chilcot into the dimly lighted room that once had been an ornate saloon. There still was a crumbling bar at one end and rotting chairs and tables between it and the door. A lantern on the bar gave off a murky light. A fire had been kindled in an ancient stove, and the outlaw's packs and saddles cluttered the floor. The tow-headed outlaw stood near the stove. A squat, one-eyed man glanced up from a stirrup he had been fixing.

Bobby Mace sat on the floor, his back against the bar. His wrists and ankles were bound and there was a smear of blood on his face. The button was staring at Chilcot with sudden desperate hope in his dark eyes.

Chilcot looked casually at Bobby, hoping wilding that the youngster wouldn't give him away. Almost instantly Bobby looked the other way, as though he'd never seen Chilcot before. Pride and fresh confidence rose inside Chilcot.

Chilcot felt like a deer ringed by wolves, but he tried to act unconcerned. He glanced at the food the tow-headed renegade had laid out and rubbed his stomach.

"Reckon I mentioned I was hungry, didn't I?" he asked, grinning.

"Can you cook?" Sundstrum demanded.

"Can I cook? Just lead me to them vittles and I'll show you can I cook!"

Lash Sundstrum had been fingering the trigger of his six-gun, but now he winked at the others.

"Our fun can wait, boys," he said. "There's the grub, old man. Get busy, and yuh better do a good job!"

Chilcot slowly went about preparing a meal. He wasn't hungry. He felt heavy and cold inside. He was playing for time, getting the lay of things, listening to what the outlaws said. He could still feel their cold eyes upon him. He stole a glance at Bobby. The button's face was pale, but he didn't look scared. He was watching Chilcot in a puzzled way, as if wondering what he was up to.

"How about this old goat, Lash?" the one-eyed hombre asked. "Yuh aim to let him blab about what he's seen?"

"Do I look like an idiot?" Sundstrum grunted. "He's out of luck, jest like the kid."

Chilcot felt no emotion at overhearing that. It didn't matter about himself, but he had made up his mind that the button wasn't going to die. There was no use waiting. . . .

"That grub about ready, old man?" Sundstrum asked impatiently.

Chilcot turned slowly, his hand under his ragged coat.

"Ready as it'll ever be," he said sharply. "You skunks'll be eatin' your next meal in purgatory, if you don't do like I say!"

The renegades gaped startledly at Chilcot, then looked at each other.

"We don't feel funny, Grandpa," the squat killer growled. "Hurry up with that grub."

Chilcot grinned. "Think it'd be funny to be blowed to Kingdom Come?"

SUNDSTRUM sensed something deadly in that cracked, piping voice.

"What are you talkin' about, old man?" he purred.

"I lied to you gents about huntin' mineral," Chilcot said. "I trailed you into the hills to take the boy back. I'm takin' him, or won't none of you ever see another sunrise."

"You ain't even got a gun!" the towhead sniggered.

"I don't need none."

"No, what you need is a tombstone!" Suddenly a gun was in Lash Sundstrum's

hand, its muzzle probing toward Chilcot's heart.

Chilcot snatched his hand from under his coat and lifted it above his head.

"You can kill me, all right," he said flatly. "But won't none of you polecats ever know it."

Every eye in the room was riveted on the object in Chilcot's upraised hand—a bottle, no more than four inches long, filled with a colorless liquid.

"Blast you, what yuh got in that bottle?" Sundstrum furiously snarled.

"Enough nitro-glycerine to blow this building and everybody in it clean to Hell and back!"

Consternation leaped to the faces of the outlaws. The towhead gave a startled yelp and tumbled backward over a box in his haste to reach shelter. The others lurched to their feet.

"You fools!" Sundstrum bellowed. "Can't yuh see he's bluffin'? Ain't nothin' but water in that bottle."

"If you think that, what're you waitin' on?" Chilcot taunted. "You got a gun in your hand. All you got to do is pull the trigger. You can't miss."

Sweat was running down Sundstrum's blanched face. His finger tightened on the trigger.

"I'll show you what I think," he snarled.

"Don't—don't do it!" the one-eyed killer begged wildly. "Maybe he ain't lyin'. When that bottle hits the floor, it'll blast us all to pieces!"

"That's what I been tryin' to tell you," Chilcot rapped. "And it'll drop pronto, if you don't shuck your guns and toss 'em on the floor. You first, Sundstrum."

The leader's wolfish eyes darted around nervously. The gun in his hand was shaking. The breathing of the four killers was harsh and jerky in the quiet room. Outside, the loose door banged weirdly and the wind screamed with laughter.

"What'll it be, gents?" Chilcot demanded. "You got just ten seconds to decide. Then I'm droppin' this bottle."

"Think you can run a windy on us, yuh glandered old goat? Ain't nothin' but water . . ."

Sundstrum's words choked off. There was only the wind outside and the doubt and terror in the eyes of the outlaws as they watched that upraised hand.

"It's your own choice," Chilcot stated. "Time's up!"

His hand twitched. Sundstrum moaned like a man in pain and the gun clattered to the floor.

"The rest of the guns. Hurry!"

The other three renegades hastily unholstered their guns and tossed them on the floor. Then, without moving, Chilcot ordered: "Untie the button."

Automatically, with trembling hands, the towhead obeyed. Bobby grabbed one of the six-guns from the floor, said belligerently: "You dang, dirty killers, I ought to gun the lot of you down!"

CHILCOT still had the bottle of colorless liquid in his hand. Now he placed it on the floor, took up one of the guns and ordered the renegades to lie on their stomachs. Like men in a dream they obeyed. Then he swiftly bound their wrists and ankles with strips of rope.

"By grabs, Chilcot, I got to hand it to you!" Bobby was saying admiringly. "I was scared for a minute they was goin' to call your bluff."

"But they didn't," Chilcot said vaguely, still busy on Sundstrum's ankles.

"Yeah, I was sure scared they was gonna cotton onto that *really* bein' water in that bottle."

Sundstrum cursed savagely. "You lyin' old billy goat, I ought to—"

Chilcot shoved him back against the floor and finished the job. Then he sighed, straightening. "Reckon we won't need this any more," Bobby said.

He had taken the bottle from the floor and walked to the door, was starting to fling it. Chilcot yelled frantically and flung himself headlong across the room. He was too late. Bobby had already flung the bottle outside. Chilcot's hurtling body hit the boy, knocking him to one side and away from the door.

At the same instant a leaping white sheet of flame split the night and the

earth shook with a blasting roar. There was a rushing sound, a hot gust of air, a cyclonic burst of sound that seemed to have its fierce vortex in that very room.

Something seemed to lift Chilcot from his feet and smash him half across the room. He was aware of groaning timbers and falling debris. Then, as suddenly, there was stillness.

He sat up dazedly and saw Bobby sitting a few feet away, bewilderment in his eyes. The outlaws, near the back of the room, were yelling and moaning and trying to get loose, though they were unharmed. The front walls of the building were splintered. Miraculously the lantern still burned.

Chilcot got groggily to his feet.

"Button, I ought to wallop you for foolin' with that bottle. You all right?"

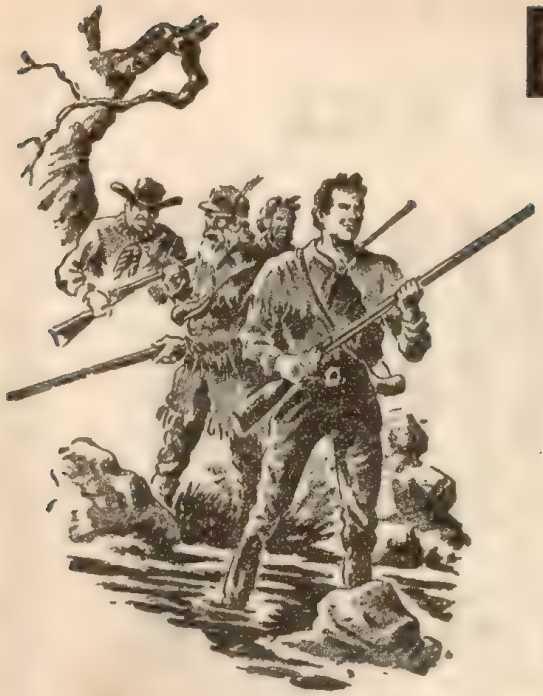
"Yeah." The youngster grinned. "By gosh, that *wasn't* water in that bottle, was it? But I still say you showed them gents what real nerve is."

All at once a queer feeling came over Chilcot Horn. He looked blankly at the gun that was still in his hand. He wasn't scared. He hadn't been scared all along! In fighting for the button, he hadn't had time to think of himself.

"I knew if my Daddy didn't find me, you would," Bobby was saying proudly. "I knew you'd give this bunch their needin's. My Daddy and Mom'll be proud of you, too, when I tell 'em what you done. They'll want you to come live with us, I bet, and you'll just about have to do it. You will, won't you?"

Elation rushed over Chilcot. He'd not only saved Bobby Mace, he'd whipped the ghastly, unreal fear that for thirty years had haunted him. Instead of sneering and playing tricks, folks would point at him and say: "Him? Why, that's the gent who captured Lash Sundstrum's gang and saved Bobby Mace. He's one of our best citizens."

"Sure, button," Chilcot said softly. "Me and you, we'll be a pair of real fightin' men!"



BUCKSKIN BRIGADE

A Novelet of the Fur Trappers by

DABNEY OTIS COLLINS

CHAPTER I

Trail Bosses Meet

RENDEZVOUS! Up and down the long line of heavily packed horses rang the many-throated cry. Faces that were gaunt and weary from long days on the Oregon Trail brightened with smiles. The horses perked up their ears. Cheer upon cheer burst from the men. The supply train of the Great Western Fur Company was coming into Green River Valley, in Utah.

Young Brad Manhead, boss of the pack train, sat his horse atop a spruce-plumed ridge, looking down into the vast bowl of the valley. He saw clusters of tepees, and men moving about. The silver thread of the river wound through a wide, green meadow, beyond which rose blue mountains.

Rendezvous—gathering place for trappers from Taos to Canada. Trappers employed by the Great Western Fur Company were down there waiting for him. Manhead looked back at the well laden string of pack horses, and grinned. He had brought plenty of goods to exchange for those furs.

Then he thought of Jules LeGault and his face grew grim. LeGault was captain of the Arctic Fur Company's trappers, and the Arctic Fur Company was the Great Western's bitter rival. To win for his company, Jules LeGault had stopped at nothing, not even murder.

Last year, in a knife duel, he had killed the Great Western's captain, Brad Manhead's father. Then he had dressed some drunken trappers as Indians and had incited them to rob and burn the Great Western's lodge, where the stores were kept.

Manhead started his horse down the trail. He had this double score to settle with LeGault. And Jules LeGault, so he had been told, was a hard man to beat.

When the vengeance-ready mountain men gather at the Green River rendezvous, war clouds with bloody edges loom over the Rockies!

LeGault's swarthy face corded with a swift rush of anger

Copyright, 1937, by Standard Magazines, Inc., and originally published in Aug. 1937, Thrilling Adventures

ACROSS the trail of Manhead's thoughts came a piercing cry, abruptly shut off. He jerked his head around, listening in strained attention.

"That was a girl," he muttered.

When the cry came no more Manhead spurred his big blooded bay from the trail, down the thickly timbered slope beyond which had sounded the cry. Tearing through a dense growth of buckbrush near the foot of the slope, he came out on a bench overhanging a little stream. At what he saw a bitter oath ripped from him, and he shot the horse recklessly over the edge of the bench.

He had caught a glimpse of a black-haired woman down there, struggling against a man. She was clad only in a blanket, evidently had been bathing in the stream. Plowing through a screen of brush, Manhead flung himself from his horse, plunging forward.

The man stiffened, a startled oath breaking from him. Heedless of the girl, he whirled toward Manhead, streaking a hand to the back of his neck. Brad saw the lightning-like movement, and leaped sideward. The knife flashed past his cheek, to quiver in the trunk of a pine tree.

"Wilkes, damn you," yelled Manhead.

Then he had the man by the throat. His fingers sank deep into the pulpy flesh. The man called Wilkes gurgled, his eyes popped, his tongue lolled in his mouth. Manhead was choking him as a bulldog chokes a cur.

Suddenly small hands clutched his wrist. A voice plead, "Don't kill him—please don't kill him!"

Manhead looked into eyes like deep pools of blue, fringed with thick lashes that curved upward. He let Wilkes' sagging body drop, stared at the girl. Even in his native Kentucky he had never seen such beauty. Nor could the blanket she held around her conceal the curves of her figure.

"Thank you," the girl said simply.

"The pleasure was all mine, Miss." Brad grinned. "You better be gettin' some clothes on, before you ketch cold."

"Oh!" she held the blanket more closely to her, glancing down at her bare feet. With a confused little laugh she turned and ran like a deer into the bush.

Manhead turned to the man sitting on the ground, and his features became like rock. "What you doin' in this country, Wilkes?"

Wilkes looked up at him with hate-hot eyes. "What business is it of yours?" he growled.

Manhead reached down, fastened a hand in Wilkes' collar, jerking him to his feet. "You skunk, I ought to kill you, and you know it. What're you doin' in this country, I say?"

"I lost my job on the river," Wilkes said sourly.

"More crooked gamblin', I suppose? Too bad the steamboat captain didn't throw you in the wheel."

The river gambler's upper lip drew away from his teeth like the snarl of a vicious dog. "Look here, Manhead," he said angrily, "just because my Uncle Caldwell is fool enough to trust you with his supply train is no sign you can bully me. You're nothing but a mule-driver, for all your airs."

Manhead didn't answer for a moment. Wilkes' uncle, who managed the St. Louis branch of the Great Western Fur Company, had asked Manhead to be on the lookout for his ne'er-do-well nephew, to help him if he could. But how could he help such a snake?

WILKES was moving away, dark of face. "You keep out of my way," he warned. "Next time I won't miss." He pulled his dagger from the tree, dropped it into the scabbard behind his neck, and strode down the stream.

The brush parted, and there stood the radiantly beautiful girl. She was dressed now in flannel shirt, short buckskin skirt and fringed leggings. Her black hair hung in twin braids down her back, Indian style. But she was no Indian. French, Manhead thought.

"Who are you?" she asked, with naive simplicity.

He told her. Instantly a shadow overspread her face; she became visibly worried.

"I wish you would leave quickly, Mr. Manhead. I—"

"Call me Brad." He grinned. "Heap easier to say."

She flashed him a quick smile. "All right, Brad. I'm Annette. But I wish you'd go. LeGault may be looking for me. He hardly ever lets me out of his sight. If he finds you here with me, he'll kill you."

Manhead stared at her. What connection had this lovely girl with Jules LeGault? Before he could ask the question, he heard a crashing through the brush in the direction Wilkes had taken. Annette touched his arm.

"That's LeGault now," she said, fear in her blue eyes. "Won't you please go—for my sake?"

"Run away, you mean?" Manhead smiled. "No, I want to see what this mighty LeGault looks like."

With a sigh of hopelessness Annette turned, facing the brush.

A giant cleaved through the brush upon them. Six-feet-four in his moccasins he stood, with a sheaf of straight black hair extending from his coonskin cap over his brawny shoulders. His leather breeches and leggings and his fine elkskin hunting coat bulged with the muscle that rippled underneath in packed layers. Clean shaven, hawk nosed, with piercing black eyes that were never still and a mouth like a steel trap—such was the man Wilkes had directed toward Brad and Annette. Here was Jules LeGault.

"Sacré Américain!" he roared in a voice of thunder, his huge hairy hand clutching the bone hilt of the Green River knife whose copper-riveted sheath hung at his side. "Skonke! What you do to my daughter?"

READ
THE RIO KID WESTERN
Featuring Exciting Stories of The Pioneer West
NOW ON SALE—20c AT ALL STANDS!

Manhead jerked with suprise. His daughter? Before he could answer, Annette spoke rapidly to LeGault, in French. Often she mentioned the name of Wilkes. Manhead, watching closely, saw the disbelief in LeGault's dark face.

"She's tellin' the truth, LeGault," he cut in. "But if you're hound enough to think she ain't, I'm here to answer for myself."

The black eyes of the voyageur seemed to pierce Manhead through and through. "My daughter tell truth, oui. But you M'sieu Manhead, I no like you. I no like your companee. Great Western wan litter of skonks—wagh!"

"I don't like you either, LeGault. I guess you know that, already."

The glances of the men locked. Annette caught LeGault by the arm.

"Jules, let us go," she whispered.

"Oui," he said, and he glared at Manhead. "You save time by turnin' back. Too late, beaver all gone. Great Western wan litter of beeg fools!"

"We may be fools, LeGault," Manhead said quietly. "But we play the game on the square."

Le Gault's swarthy face corded with a swift rush of anger. He shook Annette's hand from him, and a crouch came into his thick shoulders.

"Son of a peeg!" he spat. "For dees insult I keel you, by gar!"

"You ain't got the nerve to fight me." Slowly, word by word, Manhead dragged the taunt through lips pulled tight. "Not unless I turn my back."

"I keel you!" roared LeGault. He ripped out his broad-bladed skinning knife.

But Annette flung herself between the tense men.

"No, no, Brad!" she implored. "Please go!"

"All right, Annette." Manhead sheathed his knife and went toward his horse. "See you again, LeGault."

"You wan beeg fool to cross Jules LeGault," the Arctic Fur Company's captain called after him. "Nex' time you're gone beaver!"

CHAPTER II

Mountain Man

ANNETTE, the daughter of LeGault? Manhead could think of nothing else as he rode back to the pack train. A gangling, flat-faced old Negro came from behind a clump of buckbrush and shambled toward him.

"Jupe!" Manhead called. "What're you doin' away from the pack train?"

"Jes' sorter projeckin' 'round," Jupe answered solemnly. Never would he tell Manhead that he had followed him, that during the quarrel with LeGault his old musket had been trained on the Frenchman's heart.

"Boss," he said, "I dremp last night dat a purty woman dressed up lak a wolf crossed yo' path an' brung you a passel o' bad luck. Whut you think 'bout dat?"

"I think maybe I orter kick another hole in the seat of yore britches."

"Is dat any way to be talkin' to ole Jupe? Don't fergit yo' ma told me to take keer o' you'-all."

Manhead laughed. "All right, Jupe. I reckon I'll put off beatin' you till after we get to Rendezvous."

They came down the trail into the great camp of the fur traders. The packs were unstrapped from the horses and carried into the big buffalo skin lodge owned by the Great Western.

Sacks of sugar, coffee, flour, salt were stacked on the hard-packed earth floor. Three-foot twists of chewing tobacco, beaver and otter traps, rifles, galena pig, bullet molds, axes, knives, whetstones, bullet pouches. Whiskey, in flat oak kegs, curved to fit the sides of the pack animals. And to induce the Indians to trade their buffalo robes there were nor'west blankets of red and white, beads, earrings, bolts of calico, packages of vermillion with which the maidens daubed their temples.

The walls packed high with merchandise, and a board stretched across one side to serve as a counter, the lodge resembled a country store. Manhead sent the pack horses to the river bottoms, with two wranglers to guard them.

Half of his men were sent back to the Bighorn River. Here they were to build bull-boats. For the furs were to be floated down the Bighorn, the Yellowstone, thence into the Missouri, where they would be transferred to keel-boats which would take the cargo to St. Louis.

The company's trappers—big fellows, tough as hickory and dressed in buckskins—dumped bale after bale of beaver skins on the floor. Eagerly gulping two or three tin cups of whiskey, they swaggered out, leaving to Manhead the task of figuring how much they had coming.

Each plew—prime beaver skin—was worth six dollars. Two otters equaled one beaver. No other skins counted. Against the trapper's debts to the company Manhead entered in a ledger the purchase price of his peltries. The balance represented how many sprees the trapper might enjoy at Rendezvous, how many feasts he could fling, how many packages of vermillion he could smuggle to some fawn-eyed Indian maiden. No cash was exchanged.

Manhead inspected and counted the plews, Negro Jupe tying them into bundles of a hundred pounds each. The bundles averaged eighty plews. By noon the last company trapper had dropped in to pay his respects, leave his fall and spring catch of furs, and take on a few slugs of "likker"—at five dollars a drink.

But no one else came into the lodge. Free trappers, laughing and carousing, passed the lodge without looking inside. Proud, handsome Utes and Shoshones stalked aloofly past Manhead looked at his full stocks and scowled.

Jules LeGault had undoubtedly been spreading lies about him and the Great Western.

"Is dis yere all de business us goin' do, you 'reckon?" Jupe asked gloomily.

"Not by a damn sight," Brad snapped. "There's plenty furs here yet and I'm goin' to get 'em."

"Sho, I knows dat, but—Lawsy, who dat coming' wit' dem two ole mules jes' sway-backed wit' packs?"

MANHEAD strode to the tent opening. A black-whiskered trapper, slouched over the withers of his horse, his long legs almost touching the ground, rode up to the lodge. His arms were almost as long as the barrel of the rifle balanced across his lean thighs. His full-skirted buckskin coat, black and shiny from the smoke of many campfires, hung from massive shoulders. He wore powder horn, bullet pouch, and sheath knife. The fringes of his buckskin breeches were ornamented with hawks' bills and knots of black hair—Indian hair.

"Hi, Tidewater!" shouted Manhead. "Thought the Blackfeet had you!"

"Nope. Still got my ha'r." The mountain man stepped from the saddle. "Lettle late on 'count of some of LeGault's varmints follerin' me. Had to give 'em the slip afore I could git to my cache. How they comin', son?"

Manhead told him.

"LeGault's a hard man to beat," Tidewater said, throwing his packs. "He'll even give free whiskey to keep trade from comin' to you, Brad. The Great Western always done right by me. An' yore pa was my friend."

"Much obliged, Tidewater."

Manhead looked up, as there came loud, angry curses from outside, and pistol shots. He sprang to the entrance. A man, closely followed by half a dozen others, was racing toward the Great Western lodge.

It was Wilkes, his face white as death.

"Manhead—save me!" he shrieked in terror. "They're tryin' to kill me!" Panting, he dashed past Manhead, Jupe and Tidewater, diving behind a stack of fur bales. His teeth chattered.

"What did he do, men?" Manhead blocked the way of two enraged trappers who, with drawn knives, tried to push past him.

"The dirty skunk tried to cheat! He needs a knifin', an' we're gonna give it to him!"

Manhead eyed the men calmly. They were free trappers, potential customers whose business he needed badly.

"No doubt about him bein' overdue for a killin'," he told them. "But I can't let you come in this lodge."

The trappers looked quickly at each other. "Hear that, Red?" one asked.

Red answered with an oath, as he turned away. "We'll keep outo yore lodge, don't worry! LeGault will be glad to see us. To hell with an outfit that hires crooked gamblers!"

"They lied," said Wilkes, coming from behind the packs as soon as the men were gone. "I caught them cheating. Their accusing me was all a bluff."

"Shut up!" Manhead told him harshly.

Wilkes looked at him, his lips curled in a sneer. He went to the back of the lodge.

"Who is that feller?" asked Tidewater, looking disgustedly at Wilkes.

"Caldwell's his uncle. I promised Caldwell I'd look after the fool—only, I'm the fool. Now, our chances of dealin' with the free trappers are gone beaver."

"Wilkes didn't help 'em none," the mountain man admitted.

Jupe slyly took a black buckeye from a red flannel bag around his neck.

"Buck, ole boy," he mumbled, "you ain't never fail me yet. Quit yo' crappin' out an' th'ow me a natchel!"

Leaving Tidewater and Jupe in charge of the lodge, Manhead started out to the Indian encampment. In the tepees that dotted the river bank in scattered rows, were bales and bales of buffalo and beaver skins. Or so he thought. For he knew that the Indian, unlike the impetuous, freehanded mountain man, did not sell all his furs at once.

Manhead intended to pow-wow with the chiefs.

He passed near a tightly packed circle of hurrahing, swearing men, intent on some game or combat going on in their midst. Looking over the hunched backs, he saw LeGault slapping dust from his sleeves, and laughing.

Getting to his knees was the trapper Red. LeGault had just thrown him.

LeGault's eyes met Brad Manhead's, and his belly laugh became a contemptuous sneer.

"Sacre le Great Western!" he bellowed, pounding his muscle-plated chest. "I'm de beeg buck of dis lick—mo!"

"Take him on, Manhead," growled Red, a leer in his face. "He's too much beaver for me."

"Wagh! Heem wrestle wit' me?" taunted LeGault. He made an abrupt gesture with his huge hands. "I crack hees ribs —so!"

The trappers, to a man, looked expectantly at Manhead. Some, drunker than his fellows, yelled at him to "lick hell outa the big Canuck!" and to "Wring the big frawg-eatin' son's neck!"

Manhead went on toward the tepees. He had a double score to settle with LeGault. But he felt that this was not the time to do it. Too much else on his mind right now. But LeGault stepped in front of him.

"Where the hell you t'ink you go?" he demanded insultingly.

It was very evident LeGault wanted a fight.

CHAPTER III

High Stakes

MANHEAD sensed instantly that not only he but the Great Western Fur Company, was being challenged. He felt the gaze of the Great Western hunters upon him, the looks of the Arctic men on their leader. Here was the rivalry between the fur companies condensed into a struggle between LeGault and himself.

Though the voyageur was four inches taller and thirty pounds heavier than he, Manhead did not hesitate. He handed his sheath knife and pistol to a trapper. LeGault was unarmed. A low, excited murmur swept the circle of mountain men. Here was going to be a fight—a proper fight!

Slowly Manhead and LeGault circled, each taking the other's measure, crouching on the balls of their feet, arms crooked and rigid. Three times the giant Canuck rushed Manhead like an infuriated bull. Each time Manhead dodged the bone-crushing clutch of those mighty arms.

"Don't run—fight!" roared LeGault.

The onlookers took up the cry. Angry shouts, uncouth taunts were hurled at Manhead. They came from Great Western and Arctic men alike. There was little loyalty among them; almost no sense of the value of united action. These mountain men, independent as sky pines, called no man master. In this fight, as in all fights, it was, "May the best man win!" Only the fight must be swift and merciless.

Panther-quick, Manhead leaped in and seized LeGault around the waist. A surprised oath ripped from LeGault's throat. Mightily he strove to fasten his arms around Manhead's neck. With a savage knee-thrust against the base of LeGault's spine, followed by a quick body-twist, Manhead hurled him to earth.

LeGault sprang up amid a deafening chorus of derisive yells, the hard, confident smile gone from his lips. More cautious now, after two or three passes he caught Manhead by an arm, swung him, clutched him around the chest. At the bearlike squeeze, Manhead's breath gushed from his lungs.

But he was tough as the hickory that grew in his Kentucky woods. He locked his arms about LeGault's neck, tore and strangled with all his fierce young strength. Like the trunk of a great oak caught in the grip of a cyclone, the locked bodies bent, wove, twisted.

They struck earth, LeGault on top. Manhead pushed and kicked the crushing weight from him. First one on top, then the other, they rolled, tumbled, fighting with everything they had—like a pair of silvertip killers. Cheer after cheer, full-throated and wild, broke from the tense watchers.

Every other game had stopped—horse racing, the gambling, the whopper-telling, the love-making. Every man in camp, including many Indians, were ringed tightly around the gasping bleeding men tearing up the ground with each other's faces. This was a mountain man's fight. A thumping, bare-fist-and skull killin' match. Wagh—wagh!

"Free—make 'er free! some drunken fool shouted. The cry was echoed from two hundred throats.

Manhead, pinned flat on his back, felt heavy fingers creep up his cheek. Those fingers were searching for his eyes! LeGault was going to gouge him! His blood turned to fire at thought of the pendulous blob hanging down his cheek, of the empty eye socket and sunken lid—branded for life by LeGault!

With a terrific explosion of strength, Manhead jerked loose his pinioned arm, heaved LeGault from him. Up he staggered, his breath escaping in short, broken sobs, his shirt hanging in tatters from his heaving chest.

"Brad!"

Manhead jerked toward the sound of the voice. Annette! In the instant before LeGault sprang at him, he saw the girl. A great surge of strength poured into his muscles.

"LeGault!" he cried, full-lunged. "I'm takin' yore gal away from you!"

"Sacre bleu!" bellowed LeGault. "Now, by gar, I keel!"

MANHEAD met his rush with a blow to the jaw that drove LeGault backward, against the line of cursing, spitting trappers. Blindly the Arctic captain rushed him again, trying to ram his head in Brad's stomach.

Manhead threw himself upon LeGault's back, hurled him to earth on his face. If the fighting had been terrible before, there was no name for it now. The watchers forgot to breathe. Annette's cry died unuttered on his teeth-clenched lips. Even the stolid Indians stared wide-eyed, grunting.

At last Manhead staggered to his feet. Dazedly he dragged a bloody sleeve across his eyes. LeGault, crushed and beaten, lay unconscious beneath him. An ear-splitting cheer broke from the dry throats of the mountain men, Great Western, Arctic, and free trappers alike. Manhead scarcely heard the mighty shout. Annette was beside him.

"Ah, Brad," she murmured, her dark, velvety eyes aglow, "you're the great fighter! You beat Jules LeGault!"

"You an' me together, Annette. When I looked up, an' saw you was for me, that ended LeGault."

As he walked away with the girl, Manhead saw the white, expressionless face of Wilkes, saw the deadly hate in Wilkes' black eyes. He saw Tidewater, too, gnawing off a huge chew of twist tobacco, the knife he had drawn during the fight still in his hand.

"Go on back to the lodge before I start in on you," Manhead grinned. He turned to Annette. "Sorry I had to fight yore pa. Couldn't help it."

"LeGault isn't my father," Annette denied fiercely. "He's my stepfather. He takes me with him everywhere he goes. I would leave him but where could I go?"

Manhead felt a great sense of relief. He looked long at the dark, slender, buckskin-clad girl.

"Annette, is he mean to you?"

Annette lowered her head. "Sometimes, when he's drunk," she admitted. Quickly she added, "But don't you bother about that. I can take care of myself. LeGault hates you too much, already."

They came to a neat little lodge set alone in a grove of young cottonwoods. Near the lodge an old Arapaho squaw, Annette's servant was graining a buffalo skin.

"I live here," the girl said, and held out her slim hand. "Good-by, Brad. And watch out for LeGault. He never forgets."

"Annette, what made you want to see that fight?"

"Because I was afraid for you," she answered simply, and smiled.

Manhead swept her into his arms and

kissed her. Kissed her as a strong man kisses the woman he loves. "You're mine, Annette! I'll be back tonight."

She pulled herself from him, fear overriding the happiness in her face.

"Please don't Brad. LeGault will be watching."

Manhead grinned. "Be seein' you tonight," he repeated, and went with long strides toward the Great Western lodge.

CHAPTER IV

Snake Sign

TWO free trappers were in the lodge when Manhead got there. Others were coming, bales of furs on their shoulders. LeGault was paying the price for having been beaten.

"Hurry up, Brad," old Jupe yelled. "Us is sunk!"

"They keep askin' fur likker like they saw you musta had," said Tidewater. "Whar you keep it at, son?"

"Don't know, myself," Manhead grinned.

Trading continued briskly. Then, in mid-afternoon, came fur-laden Shoshones —bucks, squaws, children, dogs. They were led by their chief, Arrow Pine. The Indians seated themselves in a semi-circle in front of the lodge. Manhead, seated in the entrance, faced them. For half an hour not a word was spoken.

Then Arrow Pine rose abruptly and sat down beside Manhead. Knowing just what to do, Manhead filled a long-stemmed clay pipe, lighted it and solemnly passed it to the chief. Turn and turn about they puffed in silence.

At a sign from Manhead, Jupe laid a huge collection of presents before the chief—ammunition, a gray felt hat, a saddle, knives, nor'west blankets, tobacco. Arrow Pine gave no sign that he saw the presents. Vermillion bright calicos, beads, and a hand mirror were added to the heap.

Still, the chief made no move. But his squaw seized a handful of the treasures, laughing and shouting. The spell was broken. Arrow Pine stalked majestically into the lodge, his women dragging in bales of furs after him.

His father had taught Brad Manhead to trade with Indians, and he had learned the lesson well. Tidewater, standing guard at the entrance, let in one Indian at a time. Always there was another to take his place. The sun had long since set and the rat wicks in the powder horn lamps were burning low when Manhead at last stepped from the lodge into the night.

A million stars glittered from the black sky. A damp, fragrant breeze from the river bottoms touched his cheek. From some lonely rock drifted the plaintive melody of a whippoorwill. Manhead hitched up his belt and set out toward the grove of young cottonwoods. Though a carefree river tune played silently over his lips, he walked cautiously, keeping to the shadows. For Annette's sake, no one must know of his visit to her tepee.

Soundlessly he moccasined through the cottonwoods. With the tread of an Indian he stole up to the dark tepee. A muffled oath escaped him. He had stumbled over a limp, soft object stretched in front of the tepee. It was the body of a woman—dead. Knifed in the back.

"Annette's Arapho squaw!" he muttered, coldness suddenly upon him.

"Annette! Annette!" he called softly.

No answer. He stepped over the body into the tepee, struck a light from his flint to a candle on a table. The tepee was empty. The buffalo robes that covered the floor showed no sign of struggle.

A WHITE flare bit the triangle of darkness beyond the tepee opening. Manhead whirled, as a hot wind passed his cheek. Whipping out his pistol, he plunged through the opening, collided heavily with a man rushing inside.

"Damn you, Manhead!" screamed LeGault, crazily drunk. "I see you come here! Now, I—" He broke off, staring around him like a man suddenly gone

mad. "Where is she? Annette—where is she?" he bellowed. "What you do, skonk of hell?"

"Quit yore yellin'," rasped Manhead. "That's what I wanta know—where is she?"

Le Gault swore a great oath. Purple with rage, he jerked out his knife.

"I cut your heart out, by gar!"

Leaping aside, Manhead caught the knife wrist. They were grappling fiercely when Tidewater, Red and some others rushed in.

"What's wrong hyar?" demanded the mountain man. "Who knifed the squaw?"

LeGault loosened his drunken hold, reeling toward Tidewater.

"Manhead stole my daughter!" he shouted. "He's got her cached somewhere!"

"LeGault's crazy," Manhead told the sober-faced men. "But somebody's got her. Come on. Let's find her, men."

Wilkes rushed up, panting as if from a fast run. He shook an accusing finger in Manhead's face.

"I saw you!" he yelled. "I saw you running away with that girl! Tried to follow, but got lost. Where is she? Where did you hide her?"

LeGault's great fingers clutched Wilkes' arm. "What you say? You see heem take her?"

"Yes, with my own eyes—the damned hypocrite!"

Insane with rage, LeGault dived at Manhead. It took four men to hold him.

"Let me go!" he panted. "I cut out hees heart, by gar!"

"Let go of him," Manhead growled. "I'd just as soon finish him now as any other time."

Above the scuffle of moccasins came old Jupe's flat, guttural voice.

"Dat's a big lie, yo' Frinchman. Brad ain't done nothin'." His voice dropped. "Wanter go in dere, li'l Missy?"

Annette came into the tepee, blinking in the yellow light.

"Annette!" yelled Manhead. "Who did it?"

She pointed at the sneering Wilkes. "There's the man. He killed the Arapho, and dragged me to a cave in the river bank. Jupe found me."

Roaring an oath, LeGault rushed at Wilkes. The river gambler whirled through the opening, knocked Jupe flat on his back, and was gone. Tidewater ran after him, firing. In a minute he came back. Wilkes had got away.

"Leave him to me," Manhead said grimly. "I'll fix him so he won't give us any more trouble. Annette, I'm shore sorry—"

"Never mind, Mr. Manhead," she cut in coldly. "I know now what to expect from the Great Western men." She turned abruptly away.

Manhead stared at her, puzzled. "But, Annette—"

"I asked you to go," she repeated, more coldly.

"But I tell you I'll make that coyote pay for what he done! I'll bring him to you on his knees."

Annette walked up to him deliberately, and slapped him in the face. "Go!" she ordered.

"Vamoose, skonks!" boomed LeGault, brandishing his knife. "All Great Western men damn skonks!"

MANHEAD went slowly through the grove of cottonwoods to his lodge. His cheeks burned like fire. And he had thought she cared for him! A chilly laugh broke from him.

"Hell, what do I know about women, anyhow?" he asked himself bitterly. "But I know how to trade furs, and that's what the company's paying me for doin'."

A week later Brad Manhead folded the Great Western trading lodge and rode out of Green River Valley. Behind him plodded thirty pack horses, each bearing two hundred pounds of peltries, close to $40,000 worth. Including the cache on Beaver Creek, which Brad had already dispatched three men to bring in, he had gathered for the company a small fortune.

Guarding the fur train were twelve picked men, Jupe and Tidewater among them. Four other men brought up the

horses that packed provisions. The remainder of the men who had come out with the supply train, excepting those engaged in building bull-boats on the Bighorn, were left at Rendezvous.

Manhead had the furs, yes. He had established his reputation as a trader. But he had not settled with Jules LeGault. He had put this off until company business was out of the way. Then LeGault had vanished from camp. Three days ago he had left.

With LeGault still alive, Manhead felt that he had failed, no matter how successful the venture in furs.

Jupe jiggered up on his old ringtailed mule. "Well, Jupe!" Manhead hailed him. "Glad to be headin' home?"

"Sho' is, Boss. Dis yere country is too full o' surprises to suit me." Jupe lowered his voice. "I'd feel a heap mo' better ef I knowed whar dat no-'count Wilkes went to after you shupped him dat night. What you reckon him an' Red at?"

"Don't know an' don't give a hoot. Glad to get rid of him. Didn't think, when I promised Caldwell I'd look after him, he was such a polecat."

"He sho' talk mean when he lef'. How he was gonna git even, an' ev'ything. Yo'-all don't reakon him an' dat big, low-lifed Frinchman is gonna try to trick us, does yo'? Golly, dese yere woods is powerful thick an' dark."

"I hardly think they'll try anything. Jupe. But if they do, we're ready for 'em. Now get back there where you belong, an' try to think of somethin' besides bad luck."

Jupe raised a warning hand. "Don't say dat," he said solemnly. "Don't never make light o' signs. Dat's bad."

Manhead wondered if Wilkes and LeGault were hatching up devilment against him. There was a possibility that the Arctic captain might attempt to plunder the Great Western fur train. And Wilkes, smarting under the disgrace of having been beaten and run out of camp, would do anything to get even.

Yet, there might be trouble. That was why Manhead had almost doubled the customary guard.

CHAPTER V

Oxbow Bend

THE dark thought was replaced by one even darker. For he was passing the spot where he had come upon Wilkes and Annette. Annette with the dark, starry eyes and the blue-black hair. He had not seen her since that night in the tepee. But he had often wondered at the sudden change that had come over her.

He looked up as a clatter of hoofs sounded from the trail ahead. Five unloaded pack horses swept around a turn, one after the other. Manhead swore. These were the horses he had sent to bring back the furs cached on Beaver Creek.

Behind them rode a trapper, the tail of his coonskin cap stiff in the breeze. He was swaying in the saddle, both hands gripping the horn. Even at this distance Manhead could see the whiteness of his face. DuBose, this was, one of the three men sent to bring in the cache.

Manhead hastened to meet him. DuBose, holding on solely by his nerve, fell from his horse into Brad's arms. The upper part of his shirt was soaked with blood, his shoulder had been pierced from back to front. Brad helped him to the ground and shoved the neck of a whiskey flask between the wounded man's teeth.

"What happened, DuBose?"

DuBose coughed, and winced. "They follered us," he said. "Rubbed out Long Tom an' Kelly. Thought they had me. robbed the cache."

"Who, DuBose? Who robbed the cache?"

"Wilkes an' Red! They follered us. Now, lemme rest."

Manhead stood up, his face as hard as the granite rocks about him. "Well, men," he said quietly. "Who wants to get Wilkes

an' Red?" Every hand in the company went up, except Jupe's.

His job, so he said, was to look after Brad.

Tidewater spoke up. "I'll go, Manhead. I'll fetch 'em, an' the plews. Don't need no help."

"All right, Tidewater," was all Brad said. He knew the mountain man would never stop until he got Wilkes and Red, or they got him. "Jupe, you take DuBose back to camp. You'll have to hold him on his horse. His partner will look after him."

"Yeh, but who gonna look after you whiles I'm gone?" Jupe argued.

"Do what I tell you, without so much talkin'."

"Have it yo' way. But, look out till I gits back. When de sun went down las' night dere was a cross on it. Dat's bad sign; ain't never know it to fail."

The valley of the Green passed behind them, the Big Sandy, and the Shining Mountains. Still, Tidewater had not come back. Toward noon of the eleventh day since leaving Rendezvous, Manhead drew near the point on the Bighorn where he had ordered the bullboats built.

As the pack train wound through a fringe of pines and the river came into view, the boat builders sent up a mighty cheer. It was answered by a resounding shout from the fur train.

"Wall, Manhead, whut you think of our Injun doin's?" challenged a gaunt, bearded fellow, pointing to the row of eight bullboats—buffalo skin canoes—lined up on the shore. "Every one of 'em is made outa good willer withes an' he-buffler hides tougher'n Injun dawg. Then we calked the seams with tallow an' ashes. Them bull-boats will float from hyar to the putrified forest whar putrified birds sing putrified songs—har, har! An' never spring a leak, Manhead!"

Manhead grinned. "They better be good. There's some rough water between here an' the Yellowstone. The Yellowstone ain't no plaything, itself, they tell me. But we got the beaver, boys—plenty beaver! An' we whupped the Arctic!"

A MIGHTY cheer rang through the forest. The spirits of the men were further lifted by half a kegful of forty-rod that Manhead had thoughtfully saved from Rendezvous. The shouting, swearing, singing men began to load bales of fur into the boats. Two men were to accompany each boat. Of the remainder, some would return to the Green River encampment, some would follow the trail back to their starting point in Missouri.

Jupe dropped a bale of furs, to tug at Manhead's sleeve.

"Lawdy, whut dat comin'?" he asked, pointing to the forest trail. "Ain't dat a ha'nt?"

Manhead did not at once recognize the emaciated, ragged, shaggy-bearded man who rode slowly toward him, slumped over the withers of his horse.

"Tidewater!" he yelled. "That you?"

The mountain man lifted hollow, feverish eyes to him. "Whut's left of me," he answered huskily. "Got a drink?"

"Jupe, bring him a big drink. Did you get Wilkes an' Red?"

Tidewater sadly shook his head. "But they 'most got me. Shot my hoss; then some Blackfeet tried to raise my ha'r. Had to hunt a hole damn fast." He suddenly straightened up. "Say, they're waitin' fer ye at Oxbow Bend, Wilkes an' Red are. I overheard 'em."

"Waitin' for us at Oxbow Bend?" Manhead frowned. "Much obliged, Tidewater. Two men on the bank there could handle two dozen in the river. But where'd you get this hoss, if yore's was shot?"

Tidewater blinked, as if he was coming out of sleep. "Hell, I plumb fergot about the gal. She run acrost me back thar this mornin', heard me hollerin' for help. H'isted me on her hoss an' told me how to git hyar. Ef'n it hadn't of been fer her, I'd of been gone beaver."

"Gal—what gal?"

"LeGault's gal."

"Annette? Where's she now?"

"Back thar a ways," Tidewater answered wearily.

Waiting to hear no more, Manhead leaped on his horse and raced down the

trail. Seven or eight miles shot behind him, and he saw a small, slender figure that was dressed in buckskins.

"Annette!" he yelled, spurring his blooded bay into a run that the led horse could scarcely follow.

"I'm glad to see you, Brad," said Annette, when Manhead swung to the ground beside her. She appeared deeply troubled. "Did the man on my horse reach you in time? He said he had a very important message."

"Yes, Annette, just in time—thanks to you. But what're you doin' so far from camp?"

"I have a very important message too, Brad. Listen. I heard LeGault bragging when he was drunk. He said he would kill all the Great Western men at Oxbow Bend. I was afraid I'd be too late. I came as fast as I could."

Manhead's brain was in such a whirl that he scarcely connected Annette's warning with that brought by Tidewater, proving LeGault and Wilkes were in cahoots. All he could think of was that this frail girl had ridden more than two hundred miles to warn him.

"But why, Annette?" he asked. "I thought, after that night—you know, when you—"

"Don't you know why I did that?" she broke in, with a little laugh. "LeGault had told me that he was going to kill you. So I made him think I hated you. That was why, Brad."

She said that last softly.

SHE looked at him, smiling, red lips parted, dark eyes filled with wondrous challenge. Manhead pressed her supple young body to him. He kissed her.

Knee-to-knee, saying little, they rode to the river where eight bull-boats, loaded with a fortune in furs, waited to be floated down to the Yellowstone—past the ambush at Oxbow Bend.

Reaching the river, Manhead called Jupe aside. "Hell's goin' to pop pretty soon, Jupe. It's yore job to take care of Miss Annette till I get back. Understand?"

"Sho', I understan', I takes good keer o' li'l Missy. But who goin' take keer o' yo?"

"That's all right about me, Jupe. You look after her."

Jupe hesitated, rubbing the palm of his hand awkwardly against a trouser leg. Suddenly he held out his hand. "Take keer yo'self, Boss," he said huskily. "I don't feel jus' right inside. I'd feel a heap mo' better ef I had my ol' rabbit foot."

Brad shook the old Negro's hand and turned away. Annette came close to him.

"Brad," she said, her eyes very dark. "I'm afraid for you!"

He laughed.

"The bullet ain't molded that can hit me now."

"Sho' hopes yo' right," Jupe said fervently. "Come on, li'l Missy."

The horses, in charge of Tidewater, were driven back into the forest. The furs were removed from the bull-boats to a narrow ravine and covered with brush. Two men were left to guard them. That left, counting Manhead, a force of sixteen fighting men. Not many in numbers.

But these were mountain men; they would waste no lead.

"We'll all float down river together," said Manhead.

With deep satisfaction he eyed the grim, wiry, buckskin-clad men who faced him, hands resting on the long barrels of their muzzle-loading rifles. Their bullet pouches were filled with freshly molded galena pig, and the powder in the polished buffalo horns slung to their shoulders was dry. Dry, also, were the squares of wadding and the extra flints in their coat pockets. All were primed for a fight. And if there was anything these hardy souls liked better than a good fight, they didn't know what it was.

"LeGault is waitin' for us at Oxbow Bend, as you know," Manhead told them. "Half a mile from there we'll go ashore an' beach our boats. Then we'll give 'em a little Injun surprise party. How does that sound, men?"

"Wagh!" came the harsh, rasping answer. "Thet shines!"

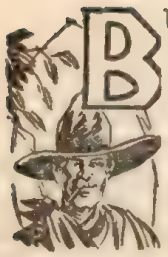
They climbed into the strong, but

tricky, boats—two men to each. They swung into the swift current, keen eyes searching every foot of both banks. To Oxbow Bend, where the river formed a lazy U-curve, was five miles.

In half an hour they should be sewing LeGault and his Arctic men in a trap.

CHAPTER VI

Up to the Green River!



BUT LeGault, too, was a strategist. At a point where the Bighorn spread its banks and the current slackened, a rifle cracked from the shore. One of the Great Western men pitched over the bow of his boat, upsetting it.

"At 'em, men!" yelled Manhead, driving his boat toward the bank from which had come the shot.

His frantic shout was lost in a deafening volley from the riflemen concealed among the rocks. Glancing back, he saw two boats, unguided now, whip over and sink. Another man, badly wounded and holding aloft his powder horn, was struggling in the water. Even as Manhead looked, he saw the man suddenly stiffen and go down.

Of the sixteen, only nine reached the rocky shore. Not one bore a bullet scratch. LeGault's men, too, wasted no lead. In the shelter of a low stone parapet overhung with maple and buckbrush these nine halted, to look to their powder and priming, and to swear hell's own vengeance on LeGault and his Arctic men.

"There's not more than fifteen or twenty of 'em, accordin' to the way their shots sounded," Manhead whispered. "We'll wipe 'em out, every man of 'em. Only, LeGault's mine. Ready, boys?"

Musket barrels pushed ahead of them, pistols primed, knives loosened in sheaths, the thin gray line crept soundlessly up the face of the parapet. The line would be thinner before very long, maybe rubbed out altogether. But their bullets would count.

Solid ground beneath their moccasins now, rocks and trees if a man needed them. Water? Hell, what good was water to fight on? But with good, solid earth beneath their feet—

The mountain men spread through the woods, as soundlessly as falling leaves. Their gray buckskins melted into the trunks of the trees, fading into the sun-spotted foliage of the underbrush.

With the suddenness of a thunder clap the boom of a rifle shattered the peace and stillness of the forest. Manhead, stretched out behind a boulder, had fired that shot. He smiled grimly as he tilted powder horn to muzzle. There was one less Arctic man in the woods.

While rifles cracked around him, he ran toward an outcropping about twenty yards distant. A ball tore off the top of his hat, the concussion driving him to his knees. Other gray forms flitted past, darting from rock to rock, from tree to tree. The firing though scattered because of the time required to reload the single-shot weapons, was deafening now.

Manhead sprang up, raced on toward the heap of boulders. He wheeled, shooting, as a coonskin cap lifted cautiously above a flat ledge. That man, also, missed. Pistol in hand, Manhead leaped upon the ledge.

The Arctic man was frantically ramming wadding against powder.

Seeing Manhead above him, he dropped his rifle, reaching for his knife. Manhead shot him dead. Mountain man fighting—always to the death. Hard on the man caught priming his gun or ramming down a galena pig. But it was fighting!

"Hey!" Brad shouted to one of his men who was running back toward the river. "LeGault's this way!"

But the man only waved his arm and kept going. Then, over to the right, Manhead heard heavy firing. He turned in that direction, loading his pistol as he ran. Rushing out of a pine thicket, he came into a glade overlooking the river. He swore mightily. Two riders were swimming the river—LeGault's men, going after the furs. But before he could slap

rifle to shoulder, both of those saddles were empty.

WITH a whoop, Manhead raced toward the sound of the shooting. A bullet struck his rifle, just beside his hand, tearing off the hammer. Twice he had been lucky. The third time—

He drove a pistol ball at a coonskin cap beneath the dense cloud of powder smoke and ran on. In a hollow down there two men were battering out each other's brains with clubbed rifles. Neither man was LeGault. He almost stepped on a man with glazing eyes who begged for water. LeGault—where was LeGault?

A scream, shrill and piercing, rang from across the river. Annette! Instantly there followed Jupe's hoarse, terror-stricken shout, and the cracking of guns. Diving through a thicket of willows, Manhead reached the river bank. He saw LeGault, across the river, running toward the sound of the fighting.

Manhead plunged into the water, his leap carrying him far out into the stream. With a great explosion of breath, he pulled himself up on the opposite bank, raced on after LeGault. His powder was wet, but his Green River knife was safe in its sheath.

Annette's shriek still ringing in his ears, he burst like a cyclone through the screen of spruce that surrounded the cave. One sweeping glance showed him Jupe writhing and groaning on the ground. Red, who had evidently shot him, lay dead at old Jupe's feet.

Annette was fighting furiously to tear herself out of LeGault's gorilla arms. Beyond, in a little clearing, Tidewater and Wilkes were rolling and tumbling on the ground.

"LeGault!" Manhead shouted, full-lunged.

Snarling, LeGault whirled on him, jerking out his pistol.

"Brad!" cried Annette, white of face.

Weaving crazily, Manhead came on, knife gripped in his hand. LeGault fired, as Annette slapped down the pistol. The ball scorched Manhead's cheek as it whistled past.

LeGault whipped out his skinning knife, ran the ball of his thumb down the razor-keen edge. That blade, with the right push behind it, would go through a man's body as easily as through cheese.

"Come on, American peeg!" he roared. "Now you die!"

"Brad! Brad!" the girl cried in terror.

As Manhead went toward the giant Frenchman, he was keenly conscious of every detail in the setting of the fight which would so soon bring death to him or to LeGault, or to both: Annette, so still and white; Jupe, kneeling in a pool of blood, trembling arms lifted in fervent prayer; Red's rigid face, leering even in death; Tidewater grimly wiping the blade of his knife on Wilkes' shirt bosom. And LeGault—

Bareheaded, the Canadian stood there, his stiff black hair standing up like the mane of a lion. A smile was on his lips, the fierce light of battle in his eye. Stalking toward Manhead with the crouching grace of a cougar, the ripple of his chest muscles visible even beneath his elkskin hunting coat, LeGault looked invincible, superb. Goliath must have so looked when he strode forth onto the field of battle.

When only three paces separated them, the duelists stopped. Warily they eyed each other, as if each was seeking some vulnerable spot in the other's defense. Some spot into which to sink a ten-inch blade.

"Ah, M'sieu," purred Jules LeGault, "w'at a pleasure it weel be, cutting out your heart."

Annette moaned, her finger tips digging into colorless cheeks. Old Jupe prayed.

Taut as bow thongs, eyes riveted on each other, slowly the men began to circle. Incredibly swift for a man of his bulk, LeGault darted to the left, stopped in mid-stride, to swing back to the right. Had Manhead been fooled by the feint, LeGault's whistling blade would have cut off his head.

Manhead dived in with downstreaking blade. LeGault struck his arm aside, almost caught his wrist, Manhead's blade

ripping LeGault's sleeve. The swing of the thrust threw him off balance and LeGault tripped him to one knee. With a cry as fierce as that of a triumphant bull moose, LeGault shot his long, keen blade to the sun.

Too high he raised his arm. Before the down-sweeping point reached him, Manhead, still on one knee, drove his blade between LeGault's ribs—drove it through buckskin, beef and bone, until the "Green River" stamped in the base of the blade sank out of sight!

LeGault's eyes opened wide with surprise, the knife dropping from his suddenly opened fingers.

"You got—me—damn you!" he panted, just ahead of the salty torrent that boiled in his throat. Like a mighty tree cut down at the root he fell dead.

Brad sheathed his knife. "Let's get away from here, Annette," he said.

"All right, Brad," she whispered.

A cautious tug on his elbow brought Manhead back to earth. He looked down at Jupe.

"Yo' ain't plumb fergot ole Jupe, is yo'?"

Manhead grinned. "You bet I ain't. You put up a good fight, Jupe. Hurt much?"

"Right smart. But I woulda been daid, ef it hadn't been fer dis." Jupe took from his shirt pocket a horseshoe, crimson-stained and freshly dented. "Dat hoss shoe saved my life, Boss. It stopped Red's bullet fum goin' slam th'ough my heart."

Manhead smiled, as he turned to lead the girl down to the river where six of his men were waiting.

"I got you beat, Jupe," he said. "I got hit square in the heart."

"Oh, Give Me a Home—"

WHEN a modern-day Texan decides that what he needs the most is "a home on the range," he's just as stubborn about creating exactly what he wants on Lone Star soil as the old-time heroes were about securing the land.

Take Marion West Jr., who selected the site that he wanted to build his "dream ranch" on. The fact that the land was perfectly flat and arid didn't dismay this oil millionaire in the least, even though the home he'd set his heart on was to be built on a hilltop, and bordered by a large, deep lake. Instead, he created a man-made hill, with tons and tons of expensive imported earth. He made his own waterway also via a pipeline which extended a full 27 miles.

After these things were created, he decided that what his property needed was a 12-foot-high fence. He went ahead and built it, only to learn later that a local law prohibited fences over six feet in height. After the other two accomplishments, this was a mere bagatelle: He removed the fence, built up the ground it ran along, a full six feet, and replaced his boundary barriers by others that were the lawfully-required height!

Another Lone Star citizen with "different" housing ideas, owns a mansion that is really an expensive yacht. It was brought inland by huge trucks, and the decks are scrubbed down weekly by the "captain" himself. This oil millionaire originally purchased the luxurious ship because it had been a lifelong ambition with him to live on the water. But once he'd lifted anchor, he discovered that it just didn't compare with life in Texas. Comsequently, he took the ship and shifted it to Lone Star land!

—Bess Ritter

NO GALS IN NOGALES

When the law deals a marked deck, Silverado Smith blasts the Dusty Frog and takes the owlhoot trail to vengeance!

Copyright, 1936, by Beacon Magazines, Inc., and originally published in January, 1937, Popular Western

A Novelet by SYL MacDOWELL

CHAPTER I

Border Boss

SILVERADO SMITH pityingly watched the thin, pale man with fever-bright eyes turn away from the roulette wheel as the dealer raked in his last dollar. His thoughts, whatever they may have been, were interrupted by a foot jarring onto the footrail of the Dusty Frog bar beside his own.

Silverado turned to see Kreeda regarding him with a fixed stare—Kreeda, boss of the gambling house, owner of the Dusty Frog, overlord of every ill-famed enterprise in the three Border counties.

"Lots of folks come to Arizona nowadays for their health," Kreeda remarked, jerking his head toward the stooped, sick man, but his hard, dark eyes clung to Silverado's face.

Silverado, watching the dupe finger his pockets, then stray aimlessly toward the street, made no answer.

Kreeda leaned closer. "And certain folks better *leave* Arizona for their health, Mr. Deputy Sheriff," he added in a low, insinuating voice.

Silverado shoved his glass toward the bartender and asked for another beer.

"Yeah?" he drawled. "Who?"

"You're one," Kreeda stated flatly.

Silverado yawned and drew patterns with the wet bottom of his glass. "Me and you, we never did see things alike, Kreeda," he said.

"Well, me and Sheriff Webb see things alike! We settled it tonight. Another thing we settled was that he don't need yuh any more as his deputy. My word to you is *vamoose*. Pronto!"

Silverado lifted one eyebrow. "And if I don't—"

Kreeda's anvil jaw was thrust a little closer. "There's a gun pokin' out from one of them doors up on the balcony. It's poked at you. All I got to do is lift one hand, savvy?"

Silverado set the glass down and turned, keeping both hands in plain sight on the bar before him. "I savvy Kreeda." He nodded grimly. "You win this time."

"I always win."

"Not always, you won't. Cheatin' and bribin' and rustlin' and murder—those things ain't winnin', Kreeda, you polecat! One of these days—"

KREEDA'S oil face darkened. One pudgy hand started to lift until only the stubby fingertips touched the bar. His smoldering eyes and Silverado's steady, gray gaze met, locked and clung for a long, uncertain instant.

Then Kreeda's eyes wavered and his hand went flat. "I must be gettin' soft!" he growled.

"Not soft," Silverado told him. "Just careful. The decent citizens of Nogales, they're mighty disgusted. It wouldn't take much to start a vigilante movement. They'd unravel yore dirty neck on the first cottonwood they came to, and you know it. Well, Kreeda, reckon I'll move along now. But this isn't good-by."

A creepy feeling between his shoulder blades told Silverado that the hidden, upstairs gun still had him covered as he crossed unhurriedly to the swinging doors and went out into the night.

The thin, sick man was standing on the edge of the sidewalk, looking up at the stars as though to cleanse his mind of the foulness of the Dusty Frog.

Silverado scooped the money out of his pocket—some silver and several crumpled bills.

"Here," he said, thrusting it all into the other's hand. "My pay. Not till just now did I know it was dirty."

The sick man looked at him with amazement, his bird-like claw closing over the cash.

"Keep out of Kreeda's and it'll last longer," Silverado advised him.

At the sheriff's office, he laid his star on Webb's desk. He got his few personal belongings out of a locker. At the livery stable in the next block he packed them in a pair of saddle-bags. He saddled and mounted his blaze-faced sorrel and as he jogged past the Dusty Frog, the sick stranger rushed out into the street and cried out hoarsely for him to stop.

"I'm Jack Ridley," he croaked. "In the days that are left to me, I hope I'll have a chance to show you how—how a fellow feels when—"

Silverado smiled down at the man's moistly shining eyes. "Maybe yuh're longer for this world than yuh think," he said. "Longer than me, maybe. *Quien sabe?*"

He kneed the sorrel along, then, past the smoky glare that rayed out above the Dusty Frog's swing doors. The false gaiety died as he put Nogales behind him and headed for a Border pass that led down into Sonora.

At sunrise Silverado looked down from a high ridge upon the hacienda of Don Ramos Riveras, nestled in a green valley. He reined the sorrel down the steep trail, and as the day breathed its warmth he reached the hacienda. His eyes took in

the scene before him.

The thick adobe walls and the pink roof were mellow with age, and over a wide-arched *patio* gate grew a thorny vine on which bright crimson blossoms flourished. For a moment he thought no one was yet astir the house.

Then he heard a step and a slim, bare-armed girl confronted him, pausing in in the archway. There was a glimpse of bare, trim ankles, too, between small slippers and wide-flounced skirt.

"*Buenos dias, señor,*" she said, lifting one shapely shoulder and giving the rider a coquettish, sidelong glance. For Silverado was not displeasing to the feminine eye. He was twenty-seven and his bronzed face was not yet seamed by sun or care. Premature gray laced his dark temples, lending charm and distinction to a bold-featured face.

Admiration was plain in Silverado's face as he swept off his dusty Stetson. "I don't speak much Spanish, senorita," he answered. "But I'm plenty interested in folks that do. Especially the female variety, between seventeen and twenty-two."

HIS eyes lifted to the crimson blossoms. He made a swift, smooth motion to the six-gun at his hip. It happened before the girl could take alarm. The Colt leaped with a thudding roar, the sorrel danced, and a flower fluttered down and came to rest like a butterfly on the girl's hair, that shone like burnished copper in the early sun.

The Colt was back in its holster and Silverado lifted his hat again with a bowing flourish.

"The picture, it's now complete," he said with a grin.

The friendliness had left her face. In rapid succession it registered surprise, dismay, then flashing anger. She plucked the flower from her hair and flung it violently to the ground. She stamped a ridiculously small foot.

"Oh, you—you *gringo* heathen!" she cried in very good English. She whirled around. There was a flash of lace and she was gone.

Silverado swept down from saddle, picked up the flower and sprang to the gate in time to see her vanish into the house. Beside the cool, shadowy doorway was an iron-grilled window. Beyond the grillwork he glimpsed the good-humored face of young Don Ramos.

Don Ramos shrugged gently. "A little unwise, my friend, no?"

"Is she gun-shy?" Silverado asked with concern.

"It is not that. My little sister Rosalita, she has tended those flowers since she was a so-little girl. Always she said that never a one should be plucked till she became betrothed."

The smile stole back on Silverado's lips.

"You see, my friend," continued Don Ramos, "it is a holy plant, that one, to those who are concerned with matters of goodness. And Rosalita, she never misses her saint's day. It is the Christ vine. Rosalita says it is the same that was woven into the thorny crown of Jesus!"

Don Ramos ran a hand through his dark, tousled hair, stretched and left the window to reappear in the doorway.

"But do not be too greatly troubled," he went on to say. "Rosalita, she may forgive. As for me, I welcome you. It happens, Senor Smith, that I am greatly in need of one who can shoot so well."

Silverado nodded.

"That's why I'm here, Don Ramos. Now that I'm no longer Sheriff Webb's *segundo*." Silverado tapped the unfaded pattern on his shirtfront where the star of office had reposed.

"You have maybe one thousand head in Powder Valley, up close to the boundary?"

"*Si*, that is correct."

"And Arizona rustlers, if and when they learn that, will find 'em mighty convenient."

Don Ramos clasped a hand theatrically to his forehead. "The senor reads my mind!" he exclaimed. "How is it?"

Silverado eased the heavy gun-belt around his lean middle and sprawled out

on a rawhide-covered bench. "If your mind was as empty as my stomach, *amigo*—"

Don Ramos clapped his hands sharply. A swarthy *mozo* shuffled out of the house, blinking and tying a gaudy sash at his middle. In rapid Spanish, Don Ramos ordered breakfast.

Rosalita did not join them, though Silverado kept a hopeful watch on the doorway. Don Ramos saw the slight bulge of the bullet-plucked flower in the ex-deputy's shirt pocket, under that star-shaped imprint.

"Permit me a word of wisdom, my friend," he remarked across an upraised cup of coffee. "In Spanish there is an adage: 'Girl crazy, gun lazy.'"

Silverado grinned again. "There's no gals in Nogales like Rosalita," he declared.

"No gals in Nogales. It sounds like one of your American popular songs, senor. But what I have to tell you is this: Last year rustlers raided Powder Valley, stole over two hundred calves, and killed three of my *vaqueros*. I learned that a rascal named Kreeda engineered that raid."

SILVERADO'S grin faded. His stone-gray eyes hardened. "Kreeda is mixed up in every crooked deal on the Arizona border," he said. "He has spies that report herd movements, ore shipments, pay roll carriers—everything."

The *mozo* appeared again. This time Silverado studied the servant closely through slitted eyes. He was sure that he had seen the fellow at the Dusty Frog more than once. When he shuffled back into the house with a dish-laden tray, Silverado leaned across the *patio* table and in a guarded voice asked:

"There is nobody you sort of distrust?" He jerked his head toward the disappearing *mozo*.

Don Ramos shrugged and laughed. "My friend, poor old Ignacio, he speaks not one word of English. If you mean that he is one of Kreeda's spies—pouf!" He rose. "We shall ride to Powder Valley and look over the ground, yes? While it is yet cool?"

While Don Ramos was gone to the corrals, Silverado called Ignacio to him. The *mozo* had one droopy eye, the result of some injury, which gave him a perpetual air of slyness. Silverado, in his halting Spanish, addressed him.

"*Mira*, listen to me!" he snapped. "Very soon you go to Nogales. To Senor Kreeda. With a message from me."

Ignacio's droopy eye was suspicious. "I am in the pay of Don Ramos," he answered.

"Fifty pesos from Senor Kreeda if you take him a note. Bring me paper, ink. Quick!"

By the time Don Ramos returned to the *patio* gate on a big bay, leading a fresh horse bearing Silverado's saddle, the ex-deputy had finished his note and thrust it into Ignacio's hand.

It read:

> Be ready at full moon. Powder Valley herd will be bunched and waiting. Pay bearer. Do I get my job back?
>
> SILVERADO.

He left the *patio* then, joined the waiting Don Ramos, and they headed toward Powder Valley. Silverado was blissfully unaware of the fact that Rosalita Riveras had overheard his conversation with the *mozo*. She took the sinister, accusing note from Ignacio.

When Don Ramos returned alone that night from Powder Valley, Rosalita was gone.

"To Nogales, she said," the worried Ignacio informed her brother.

But neither of them knew that the purpose of her journey was to deliver that message to Kreeda herself. She paused at the Border customs house and found Jose Valdez, a handsome young lieutenant of *rurales*. She showed him the note, which he read with glowing eyes.

"At full moon, Jose, you will be at Powder Valley with your men?" she said. "Is it agreed?"

"With the entire garrison, senorita!" cried Jose. For long he had been a persevering suitor of Rosalita Riveras. "And this *gringo* villain I shall settle with him *alone*! For this I shall soon become a

capitan, who knows? And then, my dove, again I will ask for your promise, eh?"

Rosalita did not look very much like a dove as she flashed back at him:

"When you bring to me the *Americano's* gun, then we will talk about it!"

She crossed to the American side, then, into Nogales, and rode through the dusty street to the far side of the old cowtown.

Many eyes followed her trim, dainty figure as she reined in her pony, dismounted and entered the Dusty Frog.

CHAPTER II

Full Moon

IN A thatched-roof hut overlooking the herd-dotted expanse of Powder Valley, Silverado began his vigil, after Don Ramos' leave-taking. He did not tell Don Ramos about the note to Kreeda, for had he done so the *ranchero* would have insisted on joining Silverado on the night of the full moon.

The undertaking would have discouraged most men as being too foolhardy. But in the natural surroundings of the Border grazing ground, Silverado saw a strategy in which he was confident he could make his single-handed play against ten or twelve members of a rustler band.

The valley was an oval hemmed in by sharp-crested hills, pierced on the north rim by a canyon that narrowed to a box. The hut where he waited overlooked this narrows, and through it Kreeda would attempt to drive the Riveras cattle. Once they were jammed in the narrows, gunfire would stampede them and turn them on their tracks. Riders in the rear would be scattered or trampled.

Kreeda, as boss of the raiders, would be riding point. Under a bright, round-moon Silverado would settle with him. Then, on the tail of the fleeing herd, he would skirmish out the others singly and complete his coup.

For days Silverado rehearsed his tactics, spending the day-light hours in gently rounding up the grazing cattle and concentrating them at the mouth of the canyon, which was the waterhead for Powder Valley. And the water held them there.

The night of full moon approached. Silverado's vision and hearing were pitched to animal keenness in that unpeopled silence. He knew where the moon shadows would fall from the steep canyon walls. He had estimated space and distance. His aim was sure from dry-shooting practice at deceptive angles. He was ready.

At dusk on the fateful night he stationed himself on a flat boulder from where a narrow horse trail zig-zagged to the narrows a gunshot below. He faced up-canyon, every nerve in him tensed to the first warning sound of the rustlers' approach.

At the first star-glimmer, he was startled by hoof sounds. It was too dark to see, but his acute ears told him that the sound came, not from the expected quarter, but down-canyon.

Presently the sounds were directly below, and stones leaped and rattled as a horse scrambled up the zig-zag trail. Silverado vaguely troubled, waited with cocked six-gun.

Suddenly a rider appeared against the skyline as the panting horse topped the last turn in the trail. A hushed, anxious voice announced:

"*Amigo,* I come!"

In the next instant Don Ramos was out of saddle beside the flat boulder and Silverado thumbed down the hammer of his Colt.

The *ranchero's* voice had lost its suave humor as he barked: "Senor Smith! It is terrible news I bring! Rosalita—"

A PREMONITORY dread seized the ex-deputy. He gripped Don Ramos' shoulder and shook him roughly. "Say it! What happened?" he demanded hoarsely.

"She is gone! Where? I cannot say except that she started for Nogales!" the other gasped. "Two days ago she went,

Ignacio told me! Her adored saints, if they fail her, by all that's holy I shall have revenge."

"Why would yore sister want to ride to Nogales, alone?" Silverado demanded.

Don Ramos spread his hands with a wild, despairing gesture. "Who knows? The *mozo,* he swears she did not say! It is to Nogales I go now! By the good God, if she is harmed—"

He halted his threat as horse sounds came through the still, clear air. Sharp and distinct, the rushing beat of many hoofs sounded in the rocky canyon. Kreeda's outfit, thought Silverado, until a shrill command in Spanish floated up to them.

"Rurales!" blurted Don Ramos.

They were ascending the zigzag trail now, close on the heels of the *ranchero.* Spanish crackled again.

"Surrender, Silverado Smtih! Obey quickly, or you will die like a coyote! You cannot escape!"

"Lieutenant Valdez!" Don Ramos cried out. His voice lifted to a shout. "Jose, you bird-witted one, what is it?"

Silverado stood quietly by, waiting.

Valdez spurred up the final ascent. He was livid with rage. The stars were out now and the soft glow revealed the pair by the flat boulder.

"Ah, he is here! This *gringo* wretch, we will wring the truth from him!" raged Valdez. He dismounted and advanced menacingly on Silverado, gun jutting out at heart-level.

"Out with it, you snake! Where has this foul Kreeda hid her?"

"Kreeda?" wailed Don Ramos. "You mean she is in his clutches?"

The lieutenant exploded a volley of Spanish mixed with furious oaths, telling of the girl's visit at the Border garrison and the message written by Silverado that she carried.

"Only today," he finished, "one of my men came from the Dusty Frog with the rumor that Rosalita is a prisoner! That devil Kreeda, who does not know his way when a pretty face attracts him! This *Americano,* he will tell what he knows! Then, Ramos, vengeance—if it costs me my commission!"

"But this is madness!" quavered Don Ramos. "Why should my sister be carrying any message to this Kreeda?"

"She took it from your Ignacio," declared Valdez. "Whom this *gringo* bribed!"

For a stunned moment Don Ramos stood stock-still. Abruptly he flared and turned on Silverado, plunging a hand for his gun. Valdez seized his friend's arm. They struggled fiercely for possession of the weapon. The lieutenant panted:

"Not yet! First, the truth out of this monster! His life against Rosalita's!"

The appeal restored Don Ramos to something like calmness. He yielded his gun with a groan. Throughout the encounter Silverado had made no move. The carbines of the *rurales* were leveled at his chest. But he spoke now. "Silence, you yapping hombres! Listen!"

Valdez and his men craned around as from up-canyon came the telltale sounds of riders cautiously approaching the narrows. Kreeda's thieves were headed for their rendezvous with death.

THE moment Rosalita Riveras entered Kreeda's dive she regretted her impulsive action. Through her eighteen years she had led a gentle, pious life. A more sophisticated girl would have known that the Dusty Frog was no place to go unescorted.

As she reached the swinging doors a heavy hand gripped her arm and whirled her roughly around.

"Hold on, Sis! What are you after—a job? "

She pulled herself free. "A man named Kreeda—where is he?" she asked.

A slow, crafty smile spread over the man's face. "Kreeda—that's me," he declared. Rosalita gave him Silverado's note. He read it with a puzzled scowl.

"So!" he finally grunted. "I figured that gent would try to crawl back into the fold!" His eyes left the message and traveled deliberately from the girl's feet to her flushed and uneasy face.

"Little friend of Silverado's, are you?" he asked with forced geniality. "No wonder he never even looked at the she relics here in my joint! He says to pay you."

"I ask nothing!" Rosalita declared breathlessly, backing toward the door.

Kreeda grabbed her again. "Hold on," he said, his eyes devouring her beauty. "C'mon upstairs, sis. Forget about that penny-ante deputy. I'll make you a business proposition. Can you sing, dance, entertain?"

Her strength was nothing to the man's. In his grasp she was forced across to the stairs that led to the balcony above the bar. Her heart clamored in her throat as he guided her into a room and kicked the door shut behind them.

He freed her then. But his joviality had gone. "Maybe this is a trick, maybe it ain't," he growled. "One thing sure, though, sis. You are stayin' here till I make sure!"

At the end of the room, near a small window, was a desk. A partly emptied bottle stood on it. Rosalita looking about her desperately, saw the bottle and leaped for it. Kreeda charged as she grasped it. He grabbed the bottle and wrested it from her as she struck.

"Why you little hell-cat!" he snarled.

She tore away from him again and fled to the window. Kreeda dropped the bottle, ignoring the contents that gurgled out on the bare floor. He caught her again just as she was squirming out.

Rosalita screamed. Kreeda then clamped a hand roughly over her mouth. He pawed out to the desk and jabbed a button. A door slammed somewhere, and the floor shook under heavy, hurried steps on the balcony. A barrel-sized woman with streaky red hair and a cigarette in a corner of her mouth lumbered into the room.

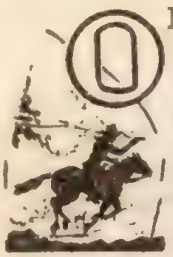
Kreeda flung the quivering Rosalita at her. "Here, Kate!" he ordered roughly. "Cage up this dame till I get time to tame her!" The big woman wrapped thick, competent arms around the girl in time to prevent her from springing at the man. Rosalita struggled wildly.

"Take it easy, dearie," she crooned placidly. "Kreeda, you blockhead, ain't you never goin' to learn how to handle wimmen? Come along, dearie, let him rave by himself. I never could stand rough ones, myself. Come along with auntie and count your beads till they fall apart."

It was next day, when a girl of her own race brought her food, that Rosalita sent word to any *rurale* that might be down at the bar that she was held prisoner in the Dusty Frog. The soldier carried the information to Lieutenant Valdez.

CHAPTER III

On to Nogales



ON THE afternoon preceding the full moon, seven riders filtered out of Nogales, singly and in pairs. One of them was Kreeda himself. At sunset he assembled with his outlaws at the head of the canyon that descended to the grazing grounds where the Riveras herd was bunched.

Lieutenant Valdez, hearing them come, gave a command to his men in a hissing whisper. "Wait till I give the order! Then load and fire!"

Silverado protested. "The moon is not yet up! Wait till they pass the narrows and return."

"Hah! Another *Americano* trick, eh? Who knows, they may not return!"

Silverado appealed to Don Ramos. "Kreeda, *he's* the man we want! He's down there, I'm sure of it! Don't let this slick-ear soldier spoil our chances!"

Don Ramos interrupted bitterly. "You have betrayed me once, senor. Would I be so great a fool as to listen to you now? Lieutenant Valdez will decide."

Valdez decided. He rasped his order, the rifle bolt actions clanked, and the *rurales* poured blazing tumult into the narrows. The flame-spurting muzzles revealed a demoralized clutter of riders for a second. Then a shout rose and a

scattered procession of horses raced back up-canyon and toward American soil.

At the thundering volley, Silverado leaped for his horse. With a frenzied cry, Don Ramos sprang in front of him. Silverado hooked a spur behind the *ranchero's* ankles and sent him toppling.

Valdez wheeled around. Silverado struck him across the wrist with his Colt barrel. With a curse of pain, the lieutenant dropped his pistol. He bent down, reaching for it. Silverado kicked the weapon over the rock brink.

The *rurales* were changing down the trail, shooting wildly as they went. Silverado was alone with Valdez and Don Ramos, holding them at bay with his gun.

"You've sure gummed up this detail between you!" he rapped out. "Those rustlers will be across the line before your men get in sight of them!"

Valdez was backing toward the boulder. He had left the gun he had taken from Don Ramos there. The moon was rising and the first weak rays revealed the weapon. Just as the lieutenant's hand groped for it, Silverado's six-gun roared. Lead splashed on rock and sent Don Ramos' gun spinning across the flat top and into a shadowy crevice.

Valdez snatched back his reaching hand, but his courage had not left him. He called to his men. Silverado swept to saddle.

"Get on your horse and keep in front of me!" the ex-deputy demanded. "Tell your hombres to let us pass!"

"And if I refuse?"

"I'll blow those brass buttons clean through your carcass!" As the lieutenant fumingly obeyed, Silverado said to Don Ramos:

"I'm going after your sister, *amigo*. Sure, I wrote that note to get Kreeda here. These *rurales* can't go hell-tootin' over into Arizona—but on the other hand, you're not wearin' any uniform. Are yuh comin'?"

"It's a trick—a cursed *gringo* trick!" yelled Valdez.

Don Ramos' first anger had passed. He hesitated.

"Make up your mind sudden, Don Ramos!" Silverado sang out impatiently. "If Kreeda gets to Nogales more than three jumps ahead of us, we never will find her. We'll be too late."

Don Ramos decided by capturing his horse and mounting. "It is our only chance, Jose," he said to the agitated lieutenant. "I go with Senor Smith. Of a certainty, now that I think more clearly, it was not he who sent Rosalita to Nogales."

The lieutenant, sputtering protests, led the way down the trail past the *rurales*. The shooting had stopped. The moon rose rapidly, its pale light exploring the canyon shadows, as though searching for the stilled echoes.

As their horses carried them in that gruelling pursuit, and they rounded a bend in the trail, Silverado and Don Ramos came upon a huddled body.

Silverado was first to the ground. He rolled the luckless man over on his back. He was dead. The leaden hail from above had claimed this one victim. A bullet had entered the hollow of his neck. Silverado ripped off the dead man's gunbelt and tossed it up to Don Ramos.

THE effect of that move did more than anything the ex-deputy had said to convince the *ranchero* of his innocence.

"By all the saints, senor, you are a brave one!" he cried. "So few minutes ago I would have killed you!"

"Kreeda lost me my job in Nogales," Silverado told him as he stepped up in leather again. "Maybe that makes things clearer. I was out to get him. But now—Rosalita, she comes first. She'll see, maybe, that a *gringo* has his uses."

"It was the Irish in her talking," Don Ramos said as he strapped the gun-belt about him. "You see, my friend, our grandfather was one O'Reilly."

"You'll need all the Irish blood you've got, Don Ramos, before we're done," Silverado told him. "And while we're speakin' of it, my grandmother, she was one Verdugo—" His voice trailed off.

They spurred on, then, knowing that the rustlers were well ahead. They rode

recklessly over rough and treacherous ground where the moonlight had not yet penetrated, finally emerging onto a wide mesa that brought the distant lights of Nogales in view.

There was no sign yet of the men they followed. But plunging suddenly into an arroyo, Silverado sighted the vague blot of riders ascending the bank ahead. In the instant that he sighted them, one halted and a six-gun streaked fire. Instinctively Silverado ducked, even before the report reached him.

Don Ramos fired back, over-eager and too quick. Lead smacked the yonder arroyo bank. "Save it!" Silverado warned him. "If they turn on us, we'll need full guns!"

But the others did not turn and attack. They fled at top speed, straight toward Nogales. It was to be a running battle, and the town was fully three miles away.

The mesa dwindled to low ground where spectral forms of cactus and yucca roused causeless alarms of ambush as the two pursuers sped past them. They crashed through brush that bordered a dry water course. They emerged on the yonder edge to the scattered blasts of rustler guns, so close ahead that Silverado believed he recognized the blocky form of Kreeda.

Still Silverado held his fire, persuading Don Ramons to do likewise. They stormed into the town to the intermittent volleying of the strung-out rustlers, and as they raced under street lights Silverado saw Kreeda leading.

He bolted straight for the Dusty Frog, and along the sidewalks alarmed citizens ducked for the cover of doorways. Silverado heard a cry go on ahead:

"Vigilantes!"

Kreeda's men, at a shouted order from their leader, hurled themselves from saddle in front of the Dusty Frog and charged for the swinging doors. They jammed there, and Silverado counted six of them. He fired twice into the thick of them and saw one man crumple. The others stampeded across the corpse.

Silverado was swiftly at the fallen outlaw's side, snatched his gun and rushed the door in time to meet the rush of Dusty Frog's patrons, seeking the safety of the street. He battered his way through them, Don Ramos thrusting his weight behind.

The place was in wild tumult. Through the smoke-laden air, Silverado saw Kreeda and the others racing up the stairs to the balcony. He fired once at Kreeda, saw splinters fly from the stair railing, and then the upstairs lights were blotted out as Kreeda pawed a switch-box in the wall beside him.

Outside the crowd was shouting: "Vigilantes! Vigilantes!" And a few ventured back inside. Silverado heard their gusty talk as he ran to the stairs. Doors slammed up on the balcony. A woman squealed in terror.

BELOW, a roulette ball rattled in a wheel still in motion. Silverado heard the clink of silver as an unseen dealer raked in the case money. A table crashed over and there was a scuffling sound. A bottle dropped and rolled. More lights went out.

The voices in the street had become a murmur as Silverado reached the top of the stairs and crouched there, two guns pronged out, watching the doors that opened along two sides of the wall. Then a new alarm pierced the darkened Dusty Frog. A voice, evidently the roulette dealer's, shrilled:

"Robbers! Help!"

His cry was choked off by the sound of a savage blow and the thud of a body. Silver spilled on the floor and rolled. Somebody shouted a curse.

One of the balcony doors flew open, sending a beam of light into the smoky gloom, revealing two men scrambling on the floor below. Silverado couldn't see inside the room. As he scuttled to a position that commanded a view of it, a gun hammer snicked. Two heavy reports jarred his ear-drums. One of the men on the floor screamed and rolled, his legs lashing.

Don Ramos, from the head of the stairs,

added his agonized voice to the din: "Rosalita! Rosalita!"

There was a muffled cry from a room that opened near the end of the balcony. Bodies thumped against the panels. Then came Kreeda's harsh, furious roar:

"Give her the works, Kate!"

Silverado rushed for the room whence the order came. To reach it he had to run the gauntlet of that open door and the light beam. A deafening blast scorched the side of his face. He fired blindly inside and a bleat of pain responded. Silverado staggered on, semi-stunned by the report. Then he heard the switchbox on the stairs open and the lights went on again.

There was a new commotion in the street, and at the shouted command, "Hands up!" he jerked around and saw Sheriff Webb framed in the street doorway. He gripped a sawed-off shotgun against his shoulder.

The sheriff was an anxious-faced man with a ragged, colorless mustache and an uncertain voice. His sawed-off muzzle wavered between the balcony and a man in a ripped, white shirt, backing against the roulette table, hands upraised.

Silverado hit the door that was his objective, and struggled with the knob. The door was latched. He rushed it with his shoulder, and it cracked but didn't give. He backed off for another battering attack, and the sheriff yipped:

"Drop those guns, Smith!"

A gun boomed inside the locked room. A bullet crashed through it, struck the whirling blades of a fan over the sheriff's head. A shattered blade whizzed down and struck the sheriff across the bridge of his thin, bony nose as he aimed at Silverado. He staggered backward, flinging an arm across his eyes. The man at the roulette table ran past him.

Then Silverado hurled his weight against the locked door and with a splintering crash it gave. Don Ramos was holding a group at bay at the head of the stairs as Silverado invaded the room.

It was empty, except for a dilapidated chair and table and a sagging, tumbled cot. Cut ropes dangled from the frame of the cot, where they were knotted.

A clean breeze eddied the acrid gunsmoke. Gazing about him aghast, Silverado glimpsed the open window. He leaped to it and saw that it gave onto the top of a porch. He climbed out. A gun spoke in the street and a bullet whipped his sleeve.

He saw the flash of it from the corner of an adobe building. But whoever fired it ducked before he could blaze an answer. Silverado lowered himself over the edge of the porch and half slid, half dropped, down a column.

THERE was a rush in both directions toward the Dusty Frog. Citizens who had taken cover at the arrival of the shooting riders were emerging now and the cry of "Vigilantes!" was on their lips.

For a long time this thing had been whispered, Silverado knew. And now, through a mistaken circumstance, public feeling against the Dusty Frog and the element it represented had reached a fierce climax. Silverado stepped back against the wall as the phalanx of aroused Nogales citizens swept past him and poured into Kreeda's gaudy dive.

Then he rushed for that opposite corner, from whence the shot had come. He heard the mob inside the place, yelling and wrecking tables, smashing the games, shattering the bar fixtures.

Another onrush met him and in that maddened crowd he knew that his unrecognized ambusher was safe. He turned back toward the Dusty Frog, intent now on extricating Don Ramos. He elbowed through the crush at the door and abruptly found himself facing Kreeda who was waving his arms wildly, bellowing to the crowd, pleading, cursing, threatening.

Kreeda saw him and his hand plunged inside his coat. By now Silverado had one gun holstered. He leaped and struck. His fist cracked against Kreeda's jaw, fairly lifting him from his feet and hurling him backward in limp helplessness to the milling feet of the mob.

Kreeda's gun came out as he hit the floor. Siverado stamped on the Border

boss' hand, as though crushing a rattler. Kreeda howled and Silverado kicked the gun out of reach, clutched Kreeda by the shirt and hauled him to his feet.

He thrust his jaw close against Kreeda's blood-splashed, sputtering face. He had to shout to make himself heard above the bedlam. "Where is she?"

"You'll never find out!" blasted Kreeda. "Not this way, damn you, Smith!"

Silverado hit him again and Kreeda sagged in his clutch. Silverado propped him against a wall and smashed time and again with the full force of his fury. Then suddenly something jabbed him in the back and he squirmed to see the sheriff prodding him with the riot gun. Kreeda slumped to the floor like a wet sack as Silverado let go.

"March for the door!" shrieked the sheriff. "You started this mess, and by cracky, you'll pay for it!"

Kreeda's head lolled and he drooled: "At Kate's hotel—don't hit me again—at Kate's—"

Silverado grabbed the sawed-off, whipped the muzzle upward. His hands stung as it boomed a charge of pellets into the ceiling. He stamped down hard on the sheriff's foot and forced him backward.

Webb squawked and tumbled. Silverado stepped on him and hauled up on the gun as though uprotting a fence post. The sheriff made a sick sound and released his grip.

A crowd was clustered about him. Someone howled: "String up the crooked sheriff, boys!"

They pounced on the luckless Webb as he struglled weakly to his feet and bore him down again. Silverado dashed for the street.

He heard Don Ramos shouting behind him: "Wait, senor, wait!"

But Silverado didn't wait. He dashed for that adobe corner and headed for Cactus Kate's hotel.

READ OUR COMPANION MAGAZINE

RANGE RIDERS WESTERN

NOW ON SALE—20c AT ALL STANDS!

CHAPTER IV

A Deal in Lead

LIKE a landmark, it stood in mid-block, a ramshackle, two-story building, the lower part given over to a Chinese restaurant and laundry. Above a narrow doorway between was a lighted globe, on which faded red letters said: "Rooms."

But here its likeness to a hostelry ended. For the narrow stairs led sharply upward to the most vicious thieves' market on the Border. Silverado knew the place. It was headquarters for a ring of Border runners. Chinese, dope, guns, cattle, women—they dealt in any commodity that offered the greatest profit at the moment.

He peered warily up the dimly lit stairs. The very hush of the place told him that it was guarded above. If he attempted to dash up, his chances for reaching the street alive again were slight.

Don Ramos panted up to him, sputtering questions. Silverado gripped his arm and hushed him.

"Stick here!" he ordered in a hoarse whisper. "Plug 'em if they try to rush out."

Don Ramos dabbed at a bleeding cut over one eye. "And you, senor?" he breathed.

A daring plan had leaped into Silverado's mind. In back of this ill-famed hangout, he knew that there was a corral. And between the corral and building, he remembered, was a narrow yard where the Chinese hung their wash.

"If I'm not back here in ten minutes," he told Don Ramos, "you can shed some of that O'Reilly blood on those stairs—on a hundred to one chance you'll get Rosalita before they get you."

He left Don Ramos on guard and circled around the building, climbing a fence to enter the dark yard.

The yard was a maze of clothes-lines, on which drying wash hung like ghostly

shrouds in the moon-shadows. There were windows above, with light showing through cracked, drawn shades, and the faint murmur of voices.

Silverado, ducking under the clotheslines, found his way to a rain-spout at the corner of the building. He kicked off his spurred boots, thrust his extra gun inside his shirt-front, and started up.

It was a perilous climb. The rain-spout was loosely fastened to the dry, warped sideboards. He reached the level of the second story windows and groped out for a sill, his saddle-strong legs clamped around the spout.

At that moment the hubbub over at the Dusty Frog was lifted to a new, hysterical note. A dancing light bathed the corral, the yard and the rear of the old building. And gunshots stabbed the mob sounds.

Silverado, craning around, saw flames leaping from the roof of Kreeda's resort. Up farther into the town fire bells started to clang crazily. A billow of smoke darkened the moon.

And then the shade that covered the window, a foot from his face, was suddenly raised. The window was thrown open and the head and shoulders of a man were thrust out. The wavering firelight bathed his face with a crimson glow.

It was an emaciated face with sunken eyes, and in the second that Silverado grabbed for his holstered gun, maintaining his precarious hold on the sill with one hand, he recognized the sick man as Jack Ridley.

Their recognition was interrupted by the sound of someone running across the corral. Ridley stared past him. "It's Kreeda!" he wheezed. "And he's packin' a gun!"

At Silverado's low-toned order, the dazed Ridley seized his arms and tried to haul the ex-deputy into the window. The rain-spout chose that breathless interval to rip noisily away from the building. Silverado was torn from his leg-hold, and swung like a pendulum from the sill.

Then Kreeda's voice, blurred with hate, floated up. "I got you, Smith! I came to get you, and here it is."

He fired. A bullet whisked through Silverado's hat crown and hit Ridley between his cavernous eyes. His hold on Silverado's arms relaxed as he toppled across the sill. Silverado kicked himself away from the side of the building and dropped.

HE STRUCK the yard heavily, a spasm of pain going through his bootless feet. He heard Kreeda swearing and climbing the fence. He felt the sting of grazing lead on the knotted angle of his jaw.

Then Kreeda dropped into the yard. But the two of them were hidden in a white-draped maze of clotheslines. Another window shot up. A babble of excited voices was pierced by a scream, abrupt as a lightning stab, and as abruptly choked off.

It was Rosalita's voice!

A strange duel started then in the laundry yard. Kreeda fired blindly. A sheet that hid the crouching Silverado jerked and a bullet hole blossomed an arm's length from him. He flung himself flat as Kreeda blasted three times, the last shot coming low and nipping the muscle bulge of Silverado's shoulder.

But he saw Kreeda's feet. He thrust his six-gun muzzle against the riddled sheet and fired twice. He slanted a look up at the open window in time to see big Kate aiming down at him.

Silverado sent a swift shot upward that shattered the raised window and brought down a shower of jagged glass. The woman ducked back inside.

Kreeda wasn't shooting. But Silverado could hear his labored breathing and a clothesline creaked as the other weighted it. Warily Silverado lifted the sheet and crawled toward him. He snaked along for several feet, heard Kreeda moving away from him. He came to where the Border boss had stood, saw wet blood-streaks on the whitely-hung line.

He looked up again. Cactus Kate had not reappeared at the window and the

alarmed sounds within were hushed. But he saw the dead Ridley dangling head downward from his window.

Kreeda's feet rasped on stone steps, a latch clicked, and before Silverado gained his feet a door opened and slammed. His enemy had made a getaway into the rear of the laundry. He started after him, and then shooting broke out in front.

The flames were leaping high from the roof of the Dusty Frog as Silverado vaulted the fence and ran around to the street. It was deserted, for the whole town was in the next block, surrounding the fire.

But Don Ramos, flattened against the front of the building, beside the stairs, was working around the angle with his gun. And from the stairs a muffled volley came, hurling splinters from the sidewalk.

Kreeda emerged from the laundry front, ten feet behind Don Ramos, between the *ranchero* and Silverado. His teeth were bared in mingled pain and fury. He raised the muzzle of his gun toward Don Ramos' back.

Silverado could have shot him from behind. But instead, he made a panther-like spring. Under his weight Kreeda crumpled and they both crashed down. Don Ramos whirled, Silverado cried:

"Don't shot! We'll finish him later!"

Kreeda groaned and quit struggling. Silverado flung Kreeda's gun into the street. Then Kreeda lifted himself to a sitting position, gripping his bloody left hand that had stained the wash in the laundry yard.

Silverado said: "Tell 'em to send the girl down, or I'll blast your ears off! It's her life against yours, Kreeda!"

From puffed, battered lips the other blubbered: "It's too late! My say-so don't count around here any more—"

Silverado, without further argument, hoisted him to his feet. "C'mon, Don Ramos!" he sang out.

Forcing the gibbering, terrified Kreeda in front of him as a shield, Silverado charged into the doorway and started up the stairs. The narrow flight reeked with gunsmoke. There were restless movements on the floor above, and at a landing midway up the steps a shadowy figure appeared with leveled revolver.

AIMING over Kreeda's shoulder, Silverado let him have it. The man screeched, toppled and plunged down halting in a limp, jerking bundle at their feet.

Don Ramos crowded close behind Silverado as they reached the landing. A blast of gunfire greeted them. Kreeda gave a bawl of anguish and collapsed. He was useless now as a human shield. For he was riddled with lead. Silverado leaped over him and went up the remaining steps three at a time in his bootless feet. With his two guns he mowed a death-swath at the top of the stairs.

The shabby hallway was a shambles. Two men squirmed in their death throes. A third was dragging himself from the scene. Others scurried like rats to the front and rear.

Don Ramos' anguished call rang through the place: "Rosa! Rosalita!"

There was a muffled response. Then Cactus Kate's voice, shrill with alarm, bellowed:

"You fools, I *told* you not to shoot! The little hell-cat, she isn't worth—"

Silverado's ringing shout interrupted her. "Bring her out, Kate, or we'll smoke you plenty! Pronto!"

Sounds of a sharp struggle then. A door flew open, and Rosalita Riveras emerged, tearing herself free of some unseen captor. One sleeve was ripped to her smooth, bare shoulder, and her dark hair was wildly tumbled.

The wounded man squirmed around and aimed up at her, hate in his glazed eyes. Silverado's gun whipped the shredded sleeve of the girl. The wounded man groaned, then plunged his face to the floor with crunching, gruesome force.

In the next instant, Don Ramos had hurled himself past the ex-deputy and clasped his sister in his arms. In a flash Silverado was with them, hustling them with rough haste to the stairs.

"Get the horses and hit for the Border, fast!" he ordered.

The girl balked. She swung around, clutching Silverado. "But what about you?" she protested. Her hand was on his pounding heart and she felt the crushed flower in his pocket under the imprint of the star.

It was in her fingers for an instant, then she thrust it back. She tilted back her head and came close, her body crushed against his own. Her full, parted lips were almost against his.

"Go!" he commanded. "*Vamose!* I'm holding the stairs—"

He didn't get to finish. She flung an arm about his neck and drew his face down to her own. Never in all her life had Rosalita kissed like that. And Silverado, to whom the clinging pressure was like a spark of electrical energy, knew that it was more than gratitude.

It was he who broke the embrace and started them down the stairs together. Rosalita's small, gusty cry floated back:

"God be with you, my dear!"

As they went, Silverado planted himself against the wall with both guns forked out, guarding the get-away. He heard Don Ramos and the girl reach the street.

Then a voice thundered down there: "Out, everybody! We're dynamitin' the building! Got to stop the fire from spreadin'! Out, you hyenas!"

A nightmare of panic followed as the tenants of the place boiled out of the rooms in which they were barricaded and fought like animals for the stairs. Silverado was swept along on the human current. Hostilities had ceased in the face of the greater enemy.

The vigilante mob became fire-fighters. It was dawn before Nogales was safe from the menacing holocaust.

But when the flames were beaten, the district that Kreeda had ruled was a smoldering ruin.

BY POPULAR acclaim, a new sheriff was named before the ashes of the Dusty Frog had cooled. In the days that had gone, Silverado Smith would have exulted in that high honor the citizens of Nogales bestowed on him. But it was a bleak and cheerless aftermath now, as he pinned the badge of office over that shirt pocket where the faded blossom of the Christ vine resposed against his heart.

So it was, at least, until Lieutenant Valdez appeared. The proud, fiery *rurale* officer was weighted with a humility such as he never before had experienced.

He bowed and thrust a note across the desk of Sheriff Silverado Smith.

"This so brave thing you have done," he declared, "it has brought two great countries closer together. Always I shall be happy to serve with you, Senor Sheriff."

Silverado thanked him, eagerly took the note and read:

Amigo: You will come again soon to the Casa Riveras, please. It is not alone I who ask it. My little sister Rosalita, she is wearing in her hair a flower from the holy vine, confident that the old prophecy will come true. Myself, I do not believe in such matters, but—*quien sabe*, who knows? No gals in Nogales, did you not say?

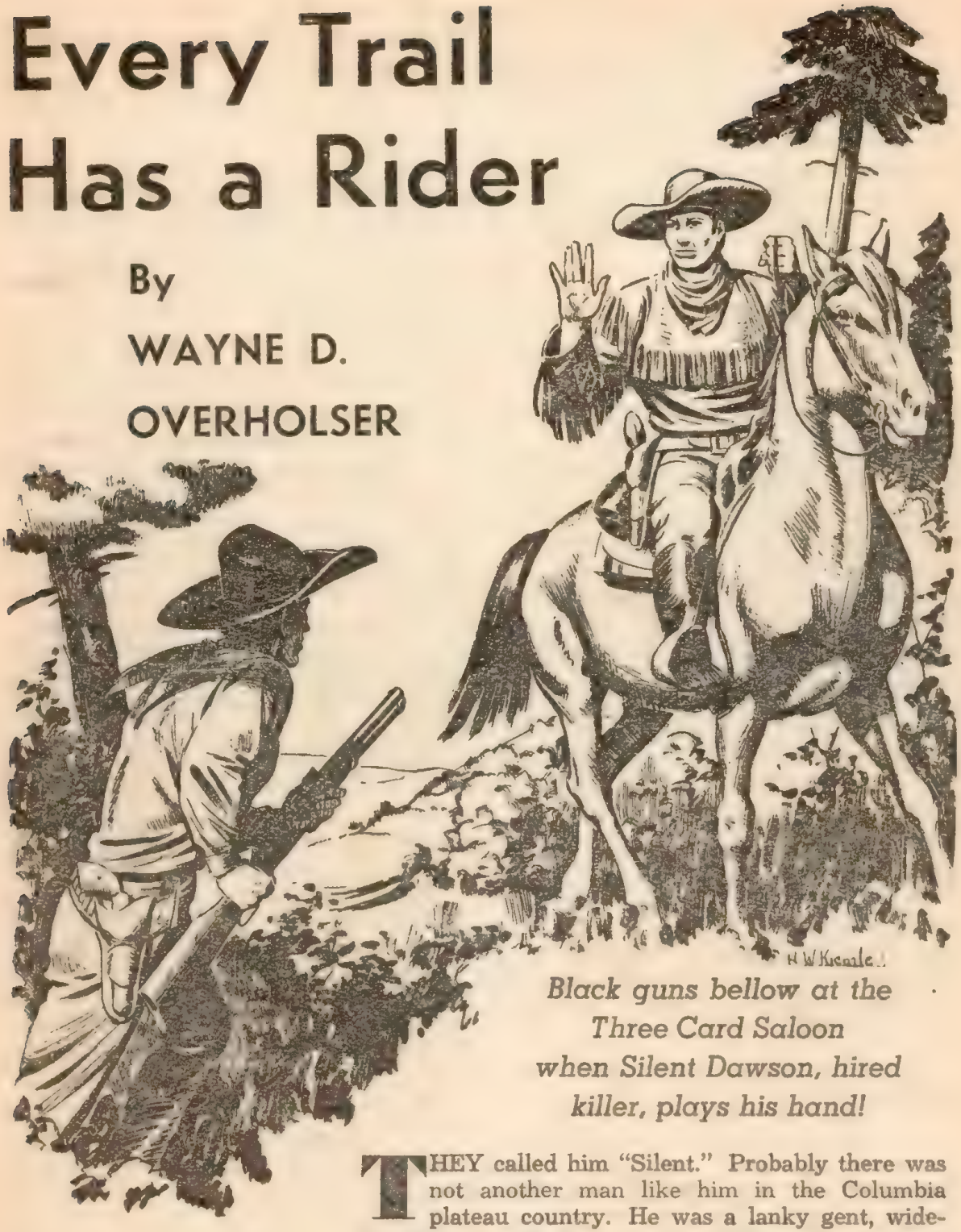
Don Ramos.

When Silverado looked up, Lieutenant Valdez had gone. And the next visitor who came in to congratulate the new sheriff found him gone, too.

Read BUGLES BEFORE DAWN, a colorful novel of the warring frontier by Gladwell Richardson, and FEAR BRANDED, a hard-hitting novelet by Walt Coburn—both in the big April issue of GIANT WESTERN, 25c at all stands!

Every Trail Has a Rider

By WAYNE D. OVERHOLSER



Black guns bellow at the Three Card Saloon when Silent Dawson, hired killer, plays his hand!

Copyright, 1942, by Better Publications, Inc., and originally published in September, 1942, Popular Western

THEY called him "Silent." Probably there was not another man like him in the Columbia plateau country. He was a lanky gent, wide-shouldered, with two guns on his wasp waist, and clad in the fringed buckskins of the old frontier. Everybody noticed the stone coldness of his gray eyes, the quick, sure way he had of doing hard things and making them look easy. And he never talked.

A gunman they'd called him in The Dalles. They'd said the same in the little cowtowns he'd ridden through as he pushed south from the Columbia toward the John Day country. A gunman who'd hired out his sinister Colts and was aiming to earn his killer's wages. They drank with him, a little fearfully, wondering whom he sought and hoping it was none of them.

They talked about the weather or anything that wasn't important. Silent would nod if they wanted agreement, or shake his head if it were something else. After a couple of drinks, he'd stalk out of the saloon, swing into the saddle, and head his deep chested bay southeast.

Silent made a bee-line from The Dalles to Slow Creek Valley, topped the pine-clad slope of the Little Brother Range, and pulled up in the yard of Kennedy Case's sheep ranch. Case had seen him coming, and was waiting in the thin shade of a poplar when Silent rode up.

Case took his look at the guntoter's long-fingered hands, the businesslike Colts, the fringed buckskins and the impassive set of the lean face. "Are you the gunslick that Silverton sent down from The Dalles?" Case demanded.

Silent nodded. He'd had his look, too, and he pegged Case for exactly what he was. A beetle-browed, domineering man with an ugly knife scar along his right cheek, Kennedy Case was a range hog who cleared out competitors with lead, preferably from guns in the hands of somebody else if the somebody else could be hired.

HE WAS a hating man, this Case. He hated everything and everybody except those who drew his wages and his bands of sheep that dotted Slow Creek Valley.

"Good thing you got here. Don Lake's keeping me out of Banjo Basin." The hate was in Case's strident tone, clear and sharp and murderous. "You're goin' to beef Lake. Cook it up any way you can. He'll be in the Three Card Saloon in Jimtown tonight. I'm paying one hundred dollars. Okay?"

Silent nodded. His hard, gray eyes not wavering from Case's square face. If he didn't like what he saw, his lean face gave no sign.

"Do the job tonight. I reckon you're fast enough with them irons you're packing, or Silverton wouldn't have sent you. Me and a couple of my boys will be in the Three Card to see it. Ride out a piece on the trail back here and wait. I'll catch up and pay off."

Silent whirled his bay and headed for the notch in the hills that separated Slow Creek Valley from Banjo Basin. Case cuffed back his Stetson and stared after Silent.

"Funny devil," he muttered. "Didn't say a word."

A stringy, long-necked man came out of the house. "So you've finally decided to pay for getting Lake salivated," he said.

Case whirled. "You knew I was goin' to get him out of the way, Rick. They're all the little outfits in Banjo Basin. With Lake gone, they won't have no fight left in 'em. They'll sell out pronto.

"Sure," Rick grunted, and patted the Colt on his hip. "I know all that, but how come you sent for somebody else? I could use that dinero, and Lake ain't fast with a gun. I could take him easy."

"Sometimes you're dumber'n a ewe," Case snarled. "Nobody knows this gent. Folks in Banjo Basin will think it was just some hard case kicking up a gun fuss. If you did it, they'd figure I was behind the killing. I don't aim to let 'em think that. They'll be a lot easier to handle if they don't."

"That one hundred dollars—" Rick began, but Case cut him short.

"It's yours if you earn it. I don't aim to let this jayhoo go around blabbing about me ordering Lake beefed. I'll pay off all right, and if you're on hand to grab it, I'll add another one hundred dollars when we get back."

Rick's thin lipped mouth stretched into a mirthless grin. "I'll take that, boss. I sure hate to see that hombre grabbing a

job that's rightfully mine. Say, what was the matter with him? Couldn't he talk?"

Case was fingering the knife scar on his cheek. "You know, Rick, I was wondering the same thing."

It was no news in Banjo Basin that Kennedy Case meant to have Don Lake killed. How or when, nobody could guess, but that was the way Case operated.

He'd cleared Slow Creek Valley out a year before, and he'd made a try or two for Banjo Basin. His bands had been turned back, two of his herders shot, and Don Lake was the man responsible for Case's defeat.

"He'll get you, Don," old Eph Meadows said. "He'll dry-gulch yuh, or he'll put some gunslick on yore trail."

"Probably," Don agreed. "But he aims to buy you boys out for a little or nothing when he's ready. He won't be ready till he gets rid of a few of us. He'll make it look open and above-board. He can't do that by dry-gulching, so I figure it'll be a fair fight. Only it'll be some professional killer. You or me or any of the rest of us won't have a chance."

"Then we'll keep strangers out of the valley," Eph swore. "We'll post men along the ridge. If any suspicious looking stranger comes in, he'll get plugged."

SO THAT was how young Curly Brock happened to be sitting under a pine on top of the ridge between Slow Creek Valley and Banjo Basin the morning Silent showed up on Kennedy Case's ranch. Curly saw Silent leave Case's place, and it didn't take him long to size the stranger up.

"Blasted killer," Curly opined aloud, and stepped off the trail.

He waited until Silent had ridden up the slope and was opposite him, then he eared back the hammer of his Winchester, and sang out:

"Hoist 'em stranger. I've got a bead on your brisket."

Silent pulled up his bay and raised his hands. Curly came into the trail. He eyed Silent for a moment.

"You one of Kennedy Case's gunhands?" he asked.

Silent didn't answer. Curly chuckled.

"So you won't talk. Well, maybe, you'll answer this. Did he send you here to get Don Lake?"

Still no answer. Silent was watching Curly's every move. A good looking, honest kid. Eighteen. Maybe twenty. He'd be plenty skookum in a fight, but he wasn't one to shoot a man in the back.

"Maybe you never learned the English language," Curly snapped, his patience wearing thin. "Well, you ain't going no farther. Turn around, and tell Kennedy Case we ain't having none of his skunks in Banjo Basin."

Silent shook his head. That was all. Deliberately he picked up the reins, and rode on down the trail into the Basin, his back a high, sharp target, but Curly Brock didn't shoot.

He swore, long and loud. Then he ran back into the pines, forked his gaiting roan, and dug in the spurs. The least he could do now was to tell Don Lake who was coming.

Lake was in the Three Card when young Brock got into town a good half hour ahead of Silent. Eph Meadows was there, too, and the Ransome brothers from up Buck Creek.

Ept snorted when Brock told his story. "Blazes, young un, I shore had yuh pegged for more guts than that. Why didn't yuh shoot the skunk?"

"I'd have had to plug him in the back," Brock snapped. "I wouldn't even do that to Kennedy Case."

"That's right, Curly," Lake nodded somberly. "That's Case's way, not ours."

"Then what do you aim to do?" Eph demanded sourly. "If this gunslick's hankering for your scalp—which he is if he was hanging around Case—he'll go for his iron the minute he sees you. About that time you'll be taking a dose of lead poisoning. You ain't no lightning streak with a hogleg, Don, and you know it."

"Yeah," Lake said shortly, "I know

that. In fact, there ain't a one of us in the basin that's any good at fast shooting. No, Eph, that ain't the way."

"I'm glad you agree to that," Eph snorted.

Don Lake didn't say anything for a time. He stood looking into the rutted street, a tall, spare man, easy-going most of the time, but there was nothing easy-going about him now.

This was the showdown that had been long coming, and played exactly the way Kennedy Case would play it. Nobody knew better than Don Lake what it would mean for Banjo Basin, if he went down before this gunman's lead.

They talked big about what they'd do to Case, Eph Meadows and the Ransome boys and the rest, but they weren't fighting men. With Lake dead, they'd sell out and quit, Banjo Basin, like Slow Creek Valley, would be Case graze.

"Well?" Eph snapped.

Lake turned his eyes from the window to the oldster's face. There was a trace of fear in that face. So it was with the Ransome boys. Not in young Brock's face. Expectancy, as if he had unlimited confidence in what Don Lake would do.

DON knew, then, he couldn't back down. He couldn't ride out of town. Somehow he had to face this approaching gunslick, and somehow he had to live.

"Maybe I was wrong a minute ago," Lake said. A humorless smile came to his lips, and faded. "The only thing Kennedy Case understands is hot lead. Most bullies are cowards. I reckon Case is. If I jump this guntoter, and down him, I'm thinking Case will let us alone."

"You're loco," Eph howled. "You just got done saying you ain't fast enough to swap lead with this side-winder."

Lake nodded, "I know, but I figure he'll be expected to hunt me down. I'm goin' to fool him. I'll meet him when he rides into town."

"I reckon that's the thing to do," Curly Brock agreed. "He'll figure he's got you scared, but if you brace him, he'll know he ain't."

"Go ahead," Eph shrugged. "Go ahead, and get yourself beefed. Then we'll settle with that cussed killer, only you won't be around to see it." He turned to the bar and poured himself a drink. "Teetotally loco," he muttered, and gulped the liquor.

They waited, the five of them, until Brock said hoarsely, "Here he comes, Don."

Don Lake eased his gun in leather, and moved through the batwings. He stepped into the street in front of the Three Card, and stood motionless as Silent's bay walked up the street. Dust lifted from the horse's hoofs, and hung in gray plumes as if waiting to watch this grim spectacle of death.

Lake crouched. For a moment his eyes locked with the gunman's cold gray ones, one live, eternal moment, then he threw his words into the street.

"I'm Don Lake. You looking for me?"

Silent's right hand swung close to a holstered gun. The left held the reins. Neither moved. He took his eyes away from the tense, crouching Lake, and looked straight ahead as his bay walked past the Three Card Saloon.

"Well, I'll be—" Unbelief was in old Eph's voice, the unbelief of a man who has seen something that couldn't have happened.

Lake whirled. Eph, Brock, and the Ransome boys were standing behind him, drawn guns in their hands.

"You—you—" Lake stammered. "No wonder he didn't go for his gun with you galoots standing there ready to squeeze trigger. When I need some nurse maiding, I'll tell you."

Lake whirled and stalked down the street. Silent had turned in at the livery stable. He came out just as Lake reached the barn.

"I didn't know my pals was backing me," Lake said. "They ain't now."

Silent didn't break his step. His stone-hard eyes brushed Lake as he passed. Lake watched him cross the street and go to the hotel. This thing wasn't right. The gunman had taken a chance with his

life when he'd turned his back on Curly Brock. There was nothing to bring a gunman to Jimtown unless he was taking Kennedy Case's pay.

BACK in the Three Card Saloon Don Lake said as much. "Maybe he isn't after me," he finished, "but I sure can't figure why he is here."

"Maybe we'll know later," Curly said.

"He ain't here for no good," Lake agreed. "Whatever his reason is, I reckon we'll knew, as Curly says. I've got a hunch there'll be powder burned before long. I reckon I won't take that drink, Eph. I don't want liquor slowing up my draw. I'll need all the speed I've got."

"You sure will," Eph grunted. "Me, I'll have a drink. I ain't got no speed to lose, and if I've sized that stranger up right, you won't have any when he tackles you."

"When I was a kid," Lake said slowly, "my mother told me a yarn about a turtle beating a jackrabbit in a race."

Eph poured himself a drink. "I sort of disremember that yarn, but I'm thinking there's a pack of wolves running around, too. Wouldn't surprise me none whatever if Kennedy Case shows up tonight with some of his gun-hands just to see how this hard case does a job."

"If he comes, it won't be alone," Lake agreed. "Maybe they figure on cleaning house tonight. That might explain why the stranger didn't go for his gun." He swung to face young Brock: "Curly, I've got a hunch that's the play. If it is, we'll need every man we've got. You ride up Pigeon Creek and tell Tom Grat and Bill Coons to be in town by night. Bart," he said to the oldest Ransome boy, "you get the men from Buck Creek. Carl, you take a sashay up Two Moon Canyon. If we can get ten, twelve men in here tonight, it'll be Kennedy Case that's cleaned out, not us."

"What are you and Eph goin' to be doing?" Bart Ransome asked dubiously. "Don't look like it's so smart for us to go hightailing off with just you and Eph here in town."

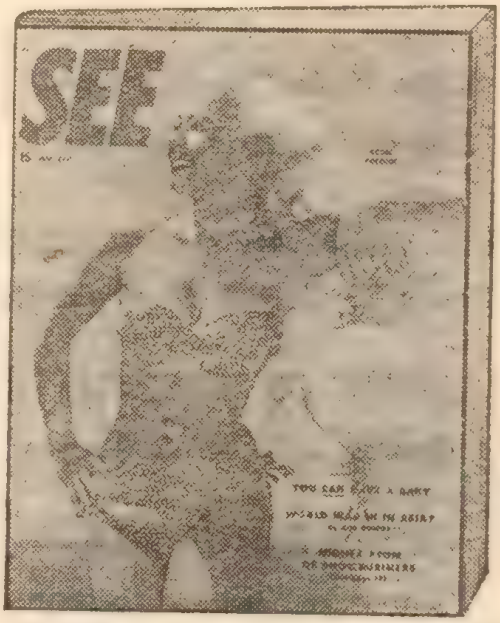
[*Turn page*]

SEE the World in Pictures

in America's Most

ENTERTAINING

Picture Magazine!



NOW ON SALE—ONLY 15c AT ALL STANDS!

Get Your Copy of the Gala 160-page 1951 Edition of—

ROMANTIC WEST ANNUAL

Featuring FLAME OF SUNSET,

A novel by L. P. HOLMES

plus

Stories by Oscar Schisgall, Frank C. Robertson, Monty Castle and Others!

NOW ON SALE—25c AT ALL STANDS!

Hola, Folks! Here's Some Grand Reading for You!

THE RIDERS OF CARNE COVE
A Novel by Wayne D. Overholser

WEST OF WINDIGO
A Novelet by Norrell Gregory

HIGH MOON KILL
A Story by William Hopson

plus yarns by JOSEPH CHADWICK, ALLAN R. BOSWORTH, HAL G. EVARTS *and many others*

ALL IN THE BIG 160-PAGE 1951 EDITION OF

TOP WESTERN FICTION ANNUAL

•

JUST OUT—25c AT ALL STANDS!

"If that gunslick was looking for a fight with me now, he'd have had it a while ago. No, Bart, I don't reckon anything'll happen till night. Me and Eph'll just keep our eyes peeled."

And nothing did happen that afternoon. The stranger didn't come out of the hotel, nor did Kennedy Case show up. A little after six, Lake got up from where he'd been sitting in the Three Card.

"Let's put on the feed bag, Eph. I think I'll go into the hotel and see what happened to that hombre."

"No use kicking a sidewinder awake if he's sleeping," Eph objected.

"He ain't sleeping," Lake said. "He looked like the kind of gent who never sleeps. Come on."

They crossed the street and stepped into the hotel lobby. "Where'd that gunslick go?" Lake asked.

"He got a room," the clerk answered. "He walks in, puts a buck on the counter, reaches for the register, and signs his name. Look." He pointed at the signature. "Silent Dawson. I guess that handle sure fits. I told him to take Number Ten. He just nods and goes up the stairs. Reckon he's still up there. He never came back down. What's the matter with that jayhoo? Do you suppose he *can't* talk?"

Lake stared at the neat, legible signature. "I don't know, Hank, but it's sure a funny deal. Come on, Eph. Let's go eat."

There was one thing that Don Lake had figured wrong. It would be eight o'clock or later before Curly Brock and the Ransome boys could get the valley ranchers into Jimtown. Lake had believed that Kennedy Case would show up later than that, but when Lake and Eph finished supper and went back into the Three Card, Case and two of his men were seated at a table opposite the bar.

"Whoa!" Eph growled, and jerked Lake back through the half-doors. "That ain't no place for us."

LAKE threw off the oldster's hand angrily. "Why not?"

"Roaring blazes!" Eph said. "Didn't

you see Case, and them gunslicks of his—Rick Dufur and Rapid Dan Cooney? What d'you think they're doing here, fixing for a picnic?"

"No, I reckon not," Lake agreed, "but they ain't goin' to back me into the street. I claim Case won't start things till his long-eared gunslick shows up. Maybe by that time the boys'll be here."

"They won't get here for half an hour. Soon as Silent Dawson finds out that his boss is in town, he'll be over here a raring to shoot. No, sir. Don, you stay out of there till the boys show up."

"You're getting to be an old woman," Lake said with a shrug. He shoved Eph aside and strode into the saloon.

"Howdy, Lake," Case said, affably enough.

Dufur and the stubble-bearded Cooney looked at Lake, but neither spoke. They shifted their backs a little, hands hanging loosely at their sides close to gun butts, and watched Lake.

"I reckon you know you ain't wanted in this town, Case," Lake said bluntly. "You belong in Slow Creek Valley."

Case kept up his pretense of friendliness: "Well now, we ain't hurting nothing. Me and the other boys just stepped in for a drink. Happened to be riding through. You boys here in Banjo Basin got me all wrong. I've got enough range on the other side of the ridge."

"You have, for a fact," Lake said.

He stared at Case for a moment, and felt the full force of the man's hatred that no amount of feigned cordiality could hide.

"If Lake's looking for trouble," Dufur began, but Case stopped him.

"I reckon he ain't," Case said. "There's been a pile of loose talk going around, but that's no cause for trouble. Is it, Lake?"

Eph was tugging at Lake's coat sleeve. "Come on, yur muleheaded jayhoo," he whispered.

"Three Cards does a heap of business," Lake said pointedly, "with Banjo Basin customers. The boys'll be in pretty soon, Case. In your place, I'd be gone by then."

[*Turn page*]

ONLY 29¢ EACH
NEW SILK FINISH ENLARGEMENT
GOLD TOOLED FRAME
Beautiful 5 x 7 enlargement made from your favorite snapshot, photo or negative and mounted in a handsome gold tooled frame. Be sure to include color of hair, eyes and clothing for complete information on having your enlargement beautifully hand colored in oil. SEND NO MONEY—simply pay postman 29c each for the enlargement and frame plus cost of mailing. Satisfaction guaranteed. Limit two to a customer. Originals returned with your enlargement. Offer limited to U.S.A.
HOLLYWOOD FILM STUDIOS
7021 Santa Monica Blvd., Dept. A-91, Hollywood 38, Calif.

MAKE MONEY with FREE STOCKING
Amazing nylons replaced free if they run or snag within guarantee period! Not sold in stores. Good Housekeeping Guarantee Seal. Big money, full or spare time, writing orders. No experience needed. FREE stocking & money-making outfit.
KENDEX CORP. BABYLON 143, N. Y.

TOOTHACHE?
Quick relief with Dent's. Use Dent's Tooth Gum or Dent's Tooth Drops for cavity toothaches. Use Dent's Dental Poultice for pain or soreness in gums or teeth. At all drug stores.
"Since 1888"
DENT'S TOOTH GUM TOOTH DROPS DENTAL POULTICE

RUPTURE
RELIEF...OR YOUR MONEY BACK
Simple, easy to wear truss made by old surgical house. *You* risk nothing. Write for free booklet. Don't delay.
WEB TRUSS CO. Dept. TF-5 Hagerstown, Md.

Be a DETECTIVE
A CHALLENGE FROM WASHINGTON D.C.!
Help Stop Crime! Train at home. Earn big money. Amazing training course from the NATIONS CAPITOL (center of law enforcement) by former U.S. GOVT. AGENT and NAVAL INTELLIGENCE Officer exposes actual methods used by Criminals. Write for FREE BOOK. State age.
INTERNATIONAL DETECTIVE SYSTEM
INTERNATIONAL DETECTIVE TRAINING SCHOOL
1701 Monroe St., N.E. Dept. 195 Washington 18, D. C.

QUIT TOBACCO!
Remove all tobacco craving safe in every form and join the thousands who have completely obtained satisfactory freedom from tobacco with the old genuine TOBACCO BANISHER. Send for FREE BOOKLET describing the ill effects of tobacco, and a safe, reliable home treatment. A proven success for 39 years.
GUSTAF H. GUSTAFSON CO.
2325 E. Vickery Blvd. Dept. TF Ft. Worth 3, Texas

Learn Profitable Profession in 90 days at Home
MEN AND WOMEN, 18 TO 60. Many Swedish Massage graduates make big money! Large full time incomes from doctors, hospitals, sanatoriums, clubs or private practice. Others make good money in spare time. Prepare for future security by training at home and qualifying for Diploma. Anatomy charts and 32-page Illustrated Book FREE!
The College of Swedish Massage
Dept. 1638 41 E. Pearson, Chicago 11

HEART ATTACK OR INDIGESTION?

THANK HEAVENS! Most attacks are just acid indigestion. When it strikes, take Bell-ans tablets. They contain the fastest-acting medicines known to doctors for the relief of heartburn, gas and similar distress. 25¢.

Study HYPNOTISM!

FASCINATING! *Almost Unbelievable*

This unusual course reveals the fundamentals of PRACTICAL hypnotism. It discloses how an expert operator performs—how he has developed his PERSONAL POWER and uses it to bring others under his domination and control. Illustrated instructions. Startling low price. Full satisfaction or refund guaranteed. Only $2.95 postpaid . . . or C.O.D., plus postage. Send for "Hypnotism Course" today!

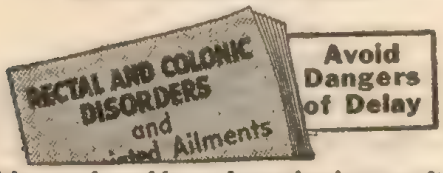
COMPLETE PRICE only $2.95

NELSON-HALL CO., 210 S. Clinton St. Dept. 2E-6 Chicago 6, Ill.

CONSTIPATION

Is Too Often Serious

FREE BOOK — Explains Relation to Rectal-Colon Troubles



Colitis, rectal troubles and constipation are often associated together. Write today — a postcard will do — for a FREE copy of an up-to-the-minute 164-page illustrated book on these and associated ailments. McCleary Clinic and Hospital, 597 Elms Blvd., Excelsior Springs, Mo.

LOOK for Rupture Help

Try a Brooks Patented Air Cushion appliance. This marvelous invention for most forms of reducible rupture is GUARANTEED to bring YOU heavenly comfort and security—day and night—at work and at play—or it costs you NOTHING! Thousands happy. Light, neat-fitting. No hard pads or springs. For men, women, and children. Durable, cheap. Sent on trial to prove it. Not sold in stores. Beware of imitations. Write for Free Book on Rupture, no-risk trial order plan, and Proof of Results. Ready for you NOW!

BROOKS APPLIANCE CO., 183-J State St., Marshall, Mich.

Store Route Plan PAYS BIG MONEY

SELL COUNTER CARD PRODUCTS

Build a good-paying business of your own. Call on dealers of all kinds; show nationally-advertised Aspirin, Cosmetics, Razor Blades and 200 other necessities. Big 5c and 10c retail packages, high quality. Attractive counter displays sell goods fast. Free book gives amazing facts. Write! World's Products Co., Dept. 73-W, Spencer, Ind.

Your Daily Horoscope In Every Issue of

EVERYDAY ASTROLOGY

☆ *Now on Sale — 25c at All Stands* ☆

Lake sauntered away and sat down at another table. As he picked up a deck of cards, he heard Rick Dufur snicker. He couldn't make out what the gunman said, but he heard Case snarl, "Shut up."

"By glory," Eph whispered as he slid into a chair opposite Lake, "you sure asked for trouble. I don't know why you didn't get it."

"Simple enough," Lake answered. "There won't be trouble till this Silent Dawson gent gets here. When he does, I figure—"

The swish of the half-doors cut through his words. The lanky buckskin-clad gunman, Silent, stood just inside, his cold, gray eyes on Lake and Eph at the table, then slowly his look moved to Case at the other table.

Eph groaned. He reached for his gun, but stopped as Lake whispered: "Wait. Let him start it."

"It'll be too late," Eph muttered. "No use sitting here waiting. He's coming, Don. Blast it, don't sit there like you are frozen."

But Silent wasn't headed for the table where Lake sat. He strode toward Case, handed the rancher a folded piece of paper, and stepped back. Case looked at him in surprise, unfolded the paper, and began to read. Suddenly he let out a bleat of fear and leaped to his feet, upsetting the table. The paper drifted to the floor as Kennedy Case whipped up his gun.

They were supposed to be fast with their irons, Case and the men who flanked him, but they were painfully slow compared with Silent Dawson's lightning speed. To the amazed Lake and Eph, who had tipped their table over and now crouched behind it, it looked as if Silent's Colt rose to meet his hand. It thundered out its lethal blast. Kennedy Case doubled up, his gun still in its holster, and spilled forward.

DON LAKE didn't know how many times Silent fired, so close together were his shots.

Rick Dufur was next. His unfired Colt dropped from lifeless fingers as his head snapped back.

Rapid Dan Cooney had both his .45s out. One spurted flame once, and that was all. He dropped his guns, grabbed at his shirt front, and coughed, a whimpering, liquid cough, then he sprawled across the sodden hulk that a second before had been his boss.

That was all. Echoes of the gun thunder beat against the walls of the saloon and died away. Smoke ballooned up and hung in the still air. Silent didn't move for a full minute. He stared at the three still forms, a trace of a smile on his lips as if he were seeing something long visioned in his mind.

Slowly he shoved his gun back into leather. Without a word or look at Lake, he spun on his heel, went through the

It was the barkeep who found his voice first. "I've seen a lot of queer doings in my day, but I've seen nothing that can tie that."

"I told you that gent was fast," Eph said, admiration in his voice. "Don, you wouldn't have stood no show whatever."

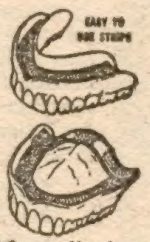
"No, I wouldn't have," Lake said.

"I wonder what made him do it." Eph marveled, staring at the lifeless bodies.

Lake walked to the bar and picked up the paper Case had dropped. In the same neat, legible hand that had marked Silent swinging doors in long strides. A moment later the drum of hoofs came to the ears of the men in the saloon.

[*Turn page*]

EAT ANYTHING WITH FALSE TEETH!



Corn-on-the-cob, hard candy, nuts ... you can eat them all! Simply lay soft strip of Brimms Plasti-Liner on upper, lower or partial plate. Bite and it molds perfectly. Your plate fits snugly and *stays that way because Brimms Plasti-Liner hardens permanently to your plate.* Even on old rubber plates get good results six months to a year or longer.

EASY TO REFIT OR TIGHTEN FALSE TEETH

One application gives instant relief from slipping, rocking plates that cause sore gums. You can talk without embarrassment. Forget temporary "stick-ums" to hold plates in. Tasteless, odorless, harmless to you and your plates. Removable according to directions. *Money back if not completely satisfied.*

SEND NO MONEY Order a $1.25 package to reline one plate. Sent in plain wrapper. Pay postman when delivered. **Or send money and save C. O. D. charges.** Also available at leading drug stores. Sample of plate cleaner **free** if you act now.

PLASTI-LINER COMPANY, Buffalo 11, N. Y., Dept. 47-I

Brimms PLASTI-LINER
The Permanent Denture Reliner

FREE—Amazing Book on
RHEUMATISM, ARTHRITIS

If you suffer the aches, pains and discomforts of Rheumatism, as manifested in ARTHRITIS, NEURITIS, SCIATICA or LUMBAGO, send today for the FREE Book. It reveals important facts about why drugs and medicine give only temporary relief without removing causes. Explains fully a proven, specialized system of treatment that may save you years of distress. No obligation. Write for this FREE Book today!

BALL CLINIC, Dept. 504, Excelsior Springs, Mo.

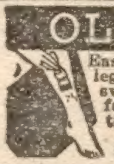
DO YOU WANT TO STOP TOBACCO?

Banish the craving for tobacco as thousands have with Tobacco Redeemer. Write for free booklet telling of injurious effect of tobacco and of a treatment which has relieved many men.

In Business Since 1909
300,000 Satisfied Customers
THE NEWELL COMPANY
153 Clayton Sta., St. Louis 5, Mo.

FREE BOOK

OLD LEG SORES



Easy to use Viscose Home Method. Heals many old leg sores caused by leg congestion, varicose veins, swollen legs and injuries or no cost for trial if it fails to show results in 10 days. Describe your trouble and get a FREE BOOK.

T. G. VISCOSE COMPANY
140 N. Dearborn St. Chicago 2, Ill.

SUIT YOURS AS A BONUS

AND BIG MONEY IN SPARE TIME, TOO

We want you to wear this fine made-to-measure suit! Make it yours by sending a few orders, and earn BIG CASH PROFITS in spare time. Your suit will help you get more orders with over 100 rich, quality fabrics, tailored-to-measure to newest styles. Also Ladies' Tailored Suits—complete line. Write today for FREE SAMPLES. No experience, no money needed. For quick action tell us about yourself. **J. C. FIELD & SON, Inc.**
Harrison and Throop Sts., Dept. T-1877, Chicago 7, Ill.

Entertaining Puzzles of Every Type in
VARIETY CROSSWORD PUZZLES
Now on Sale at All Stands — 25c Per Copy!

Free Yourself FROM Tobacco Habit

If you want to stop smoking and just can't, try world-famous NO-TO-BAC Lozenges. See how quickly NO-TO-BAC may help stop your craving for tobacco. Don't wait! Rush $1 to NO-TO-BAC, for 7 days supply. If you can quit for 7 days, you've won half the battle. Satisfaction guaranteed or money back. Write:

NO-TO-BAC CO.
DEPT. S, HEWLETT, NEW YORK

RUPTURE-EASER

FOR MEN, WOMEN AND CHILDREN

A strong, form fitting, washable support. Back lacing adjustable. Snaps up in front. Adjustable leg strap. Soft, flat groin pad. No steel or leather bands. Unexcelled for comfort. Also used as after-operation support. Give measure around the lowest part of the abdomen. Specify right or left side or double. We pay postage except on COD's

PIPER BRACE CO.
308 E. 12th Dept. TF-51 Kansas City 6, Mo.

BE A DETECTIVE

WORK HOME or TRAVEL. Experience unnecessary. DETECTIVE Particulars FREE. Write GEO. T. H. WAGNER, 125 W. 86th St., N. Y.

THREE STEPS TO SECURITY

●

1. Decide to put savings *first*, before you even draw your pay.

2. Decide to save a *regular* amount *systematically*.

3. Today — start saving automatically by signing up in the Payroll Savings Plan where you work or the Bond-A-Month Plan where you bank. If you set aside just $7.50 weekly, in 10 years you'll have $4,329.02 cash!

You'll be providing security for yourself, your family, and the free way of life that's so important to us all.

For your security, and your country's too, SAVE NOW — through regular purchase of U. S. Savings Bonds!

●

Your government does not pay for this advertisement. It is donated as a public service by The Advertising Council and the Magazine Publishers of America through the co-operation of Foote, Cone & Belding and this publication.

Dawson's signature on the hotel register, was a note:

Every trail has a rider, Case. This has been a long one, but I've been riding it ever since that night on the Malheur when you killed my father. Remember Sam Dawson, Case? You were Jake Brody then. I gave you that knife scar. You took the knife away from me and cut out my tongue. You made a mistake. You should have killed me. I figured you were Brody when Silverton described you in The Dalles. I could have killed you at your ranch, but I wanted Lake to see you die. I figured he had that much coming, since you were fixing to get him beefed.

Lake handed the paper to Eph and poured himself a drink.

"I'll be durned," Eph murmured when he'd finished reading. "I remember that. This Silent wasn't more'n a kid. Sam Dawson had a ranch. He'd just come back from Ontario where he'd sold a nice herd of beef. Nobody ever found out where Brody went. I'd forgotten about the kid having his tongue cut out. I reckon this Case, or Brody, sure did make a mistake when he didn't salivate the kid."

An hour later, the men of Banjo Basin lined the bar and drank to the gun skill of Silent Dawson.

"I reckon that was him who passed us out there by Muddy Springs," Curly Brock said. "He was sure going plenty fast."

"No need for him to think anybody'd chase him." Bart Ransome shook his head. "Shucks, he should have stayed and let us put up the drinks."

"I reckon he didn't want no drink," Lake said slowly. "Like he said, it was a long trail. He'd reached the end and I'm thinking he wanted to get the skunk smell out of his nose, after smelling Case all the way from The Dalles."

THE WEST'S BEST FICTION IN EVERY ISSUE OF

FIVE WESTERN NOVELS

●

A Big Quarter's Worth at All Stands!

A FRANK STATEMENT ON A "DELICATE" SUBJECT: CONSTIPATION

FOREWORD: *This is an outspoken attempt to discuss, with complete frankness, a condition that has become one of the world's most widespread human maladies...constipation. A delicate subject at best, it has been under medical and scientific scrutiny for years. We believe we owe it to those who suffer from it, to publish these pertinent facts.*

UNION PHARMACEUTICAL CO., INC.

The pace of modern living is blamed for many things. And those who blame it are often right.

Our lives have become so filled with daily problems, it is no wonder we long for the days of the caveman, who ate his food raw, and "got plenty of roughage" in his diet.

Doctors know that the digestive system is strongly influenced by proper food, regularity and rest. They say: (a) Eat a balanced diet at regular hours; (b) Drink plenty of water daily; (c) Get at least 8 hours' sleep; (d) Take regular exercise; (e) Always obey the urge to eliminate waste; (f) Don't worry over problems you cannot immediately solve.

Few of us obey these rules.

Hence: Constipation!

More Than One Type of Constipation

Actually, there are several types of constipation. Two basic types are common:

1. The organic type, requiring medical care.
2. The "functional" type, requiring wise mechanical correction.

The second type, in which the intestines fail to do their work properly, can often be justly blamed on the nerve-wracking life we lead.

The end of each day leaves us so tense, so nervously exhausted, that every muscle feels tight—***INCLUDING THE INTESTINAL MUSCLES. IN FACT, IT HAS BEEN SAID, THE WHOLE HUMAN DIGESTIVE SYSTEM CAN BE ALMOST LITERALLY "TIED IN A KNOT" BY SHEER NERVOUS TENSION.***

Be Careful of "Fast-Acting" Laxatives

Stop and think how you spend an average day. Strain, pressure, rush, hurry. Your whole body tense – not only from physical hustle and bustle but from mental wear and tear as well.

Sooner or later, you begin to notice your intestines are not working as they used to. So you take a "quick-acting" laxative. *And you get 2 kinds of results.*

You get quick action, of course.

But the faster you get it, the more likely the laxative you took contains harsh chemicals, scratching particles or purges that may seriously derange the intestinal tract, thus often aggravating the condition you are trying to relieve.

Such laxatives, *designed for fast one-time action*, can eventually start the vicious circle of dosage and more dosage. Millions know how difficult it is to break this vicious circle. *Harsh laxatives cannot do it.*

It is proper, of course, to class Saraka in the so-called laxative field.

But, in fact, Saraka does not (in the publicly accepted sense) give the laxative type of results.

Saraka is not simply designed to quickly overcome a temporary condition.

Saraka is designed to provide while it is being taken, the mass plus gentle urging which permits the intestines to function with the regularity to which they were accustomed before the fast pace of modern living threw them off the track.

New Scientific Idea

Saraka is an entirely different kind of laxative based on an original scientific idea...the use of an amazing vegetable bulk producer, bassorin *plus* a mild pure vegetable aid to elimination, cortex frangula.

Bassorin forms bland, gliding "softage." 20 times its original bulk, which with gentle persistence allows the intestinal muscles—weakened, irritated or tensed-up from constant purging—to get back to work as soon as they are able to do so.

Cortex frangula helps in activating the bowel muscles to respond to bowel bulk. In other words, it provides gentle extra stimulation that bulk alone often cannot give.

Here are the facts about Saraka; facts of importance to those afflicted:

1. It works so pleasantly that you forget you have taken anything at all—no griping, no urgency.
2. It acts with satisfying thoroughness; you feel the pleasant relief that comes with regular elimination.
3. It leaves no exhausting after-effect; you are "happy about the whole thing."
4. It usually acts with greater promptness than products that depend solely on bulk, mass or roughage for effect.
5. Because of its expansion and efficiency, it is amazingly economical to use.

A haggard, dragged-out feeling may be the by-product of harsh types of laxatives. Saraka's by-product is the feeling of contentment that comes from satisfactory elimination.

You can get SARAKA today at your druggist

SARAKA
Union Pharmaceutical Co., Inc.
Dept. 555, Montclair, N. J.

Gentlemen:
Please send me free introductory supply of Saraka and new booklet.

NAME_____

STREET_____

CITY_____

ZONE_____ STATE_____

©1961

WHAT Every MECHANIC Wants to Know

AUDELS CARPENTERS & BUILDERS GUIDES—(4 Book Set).....$6

A practical illustrated trade assistant on modern construction for carpenters, joiners, builders, mechanics and all woodworkers. 4 vols., 1600 pages, 3700 illustrations. Fully indexed, flexible covers. Each volume sold separately $1.50 a vol.

AUDELS PLUMBERS & STEAMFITTERS GUIDES—(4 Book Set).....$6

A Practical Trade Assistant & Ready Reference. Explains in plain language & by clear illustrations, diagrams, charts, graphs, pictures principles of modern plumbing practice including Marine Pipe Fitting and Air Conditioning. 4 Vols.—1670 Pages—3642 Diagrams & Illustrations. Each Vol. Sold Separately $1.50 a Vol.

AUDELS OIL BURNER GUIDE.....$1

384 Pages Covering Installation, Servicing & Repairs All Types Domestic & Industrial Burners. Illustrated. Highly Endorsed.

AUDELS HOUSE HEATING GUIDE..$4

1000 Pages Covering Working Principles, Installation, Service of All Modern House Heating, Ventilating & Air Conditioning Systems. Explains New Radiant Heating. Fully Illustrated & Indexed.

AUDELS REFRIGERATION & AIR CONDITIONING GUIDE.....$4

New from Cover to Cover—1280 Pages, Fully Illus. Covering basic principles, servicing, operation & repair of household, commercial & industrial refrigeration & air conditioning. A gold mine of essential important facts for engineers, servicemen, users.

AUDELS SHEETMETAL WORKERS HANDY BOOK.....$1

Practical inside information. Fundamentals of Sheet Metal Work. 388 pages. Illustrated. 11 sections. Clearly written. Essential & important facts, figures, pointers in everyday language. Ref. Index.

AUDELS SHEETMETAL PATTERN LAYOUTS.....$4

Developed by Experts for Sheet Metal Workers, Layout Men & Mechanics. A Practical Encyclopedia in 10 Sections, size 7 x 10 x 2—1125 Pages—350 Layouts—1600 Illustrations. 1001 Key Facts. Fully indexed for ready reference in answering your layout problems. Covers all phases of sheet metal work including Pattern Cutting, Pattern Development & Shop Procedure.

AUDELS BLUE PRINT READING.....$2

For Mechanics & Builders. Covers all types of blue print reading including ship & airplane. 416 pages, fully illustrated.

AUDELS MATHEMATICS & CALCULATIONS FOR MECHANICS $2

Mathematics for home study or reference. 700 pages, 550 illus. Practical mathematics from beginning. How to figure correctly. Easy, correct methods covering complete review. Illus. & Indexed.

AUDELS AUTOMOBILE GUIDE.....$4

A practical quick ready reference book for auto mechanics, service men, operators & owners. Explains theory, construction & servicing of modern motor cars, trucks, buses & auto type Diesel engines. 1700 pages, fully illustrated. 55 chapters. Indexed. A standard book for mechanics. New Hydraulic drive covered.

AUDELS DIESEL ENGINE MANUAL....$2

A practical, concise treatise with questions and answers on the theory, operation and maintenance of modern diesel engines. Over 400 pages, fully illus. All details plainly brought out, this book is of extreme value to engineers, operators & students.

AUDELS WELDERS GUIDE.....$1

A concise, practical text on operation & maintenance of all welding machines for all mechanics. Over 400 pages, illustrated. Covers all methods of electric and acetylene welding including airplane work.

AUDELS MACHINIST & TOOLMAKERS HANDY BOOK $4

Covers modern machine shop practice in all its branches. Tells how to set up & operate lathes, screw and milling machines, shapers, drill presses & all other machine & hand tools. 1600 pages, fully illustrated. Indexed. 5 sections. 1—Modern Machine Shop Practice. 2—Blue Print Reading & How to Draw. 3—Calculations & Mathematics for Machinists. 4—Shop Physics. 5—How to Use the Slide Rule. 60 chapters. Easy to read and understand. A shop companion that answers your questions.

AUDELS ELECTRIC MOTOR GUIDE $4

Practical Information Covering Construction, Control, Maintenance & Wiring Hookups of All Types Electric Motors also Armature Winding. 1000 Pages Fully Illustrated & Indexed.

AUDELS ELEC. WIRING DIAGRAMS $1

210 Pages. Illustrated. Gives practical facts on wiring of electrical apparatus. It shows clearly how to wire apparatus for practically all fields of electricity. Each diagram is complete & self-explanatory. Highly Endorsed Pocket Companion.

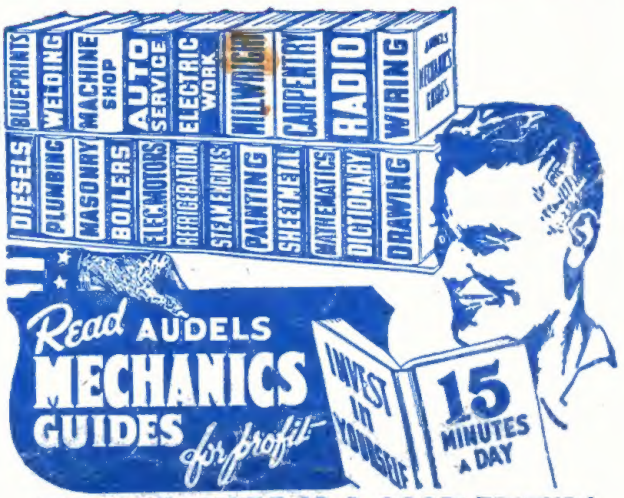
AUDELS PRACTICAL ELECTRICITY $4

A key to a practical understanding of Electricity. For maintenance engineers, electricians & all electrical workers. 1440 Pages, 2600 Illus. Covers important electrical information in handy form—including wiring for Light & Power. Indexed.

AUDELS RADIOMANS GUIDE $4

A key to the practical understanding of radio including Frequency Modulation, Television, etc., Aircraft & Marine Radio. For radio engineers, servicemen, amateurs, 914 Pages, 633 Illustrations & Diagrams. Photos. Review Questions & Answers, Reference Index.

AUDEL, Publishers, 49 W. 23 St., N.Y. 10



AN AUDEL GUIDE IS A GOOD FRIEND!

Step Up Your Own Skill with the Practical Facts and Figures of Your Trade. Save time and money with right methods, short cuts, labor saving ideas. CHECK NOW! You can look over any Audel Guide in your home. Start the Easy Payments if satisfied.

Check NOW!

Audels List Of Time Tested Practical Handy Books For Mechanics That Will Answer Your Questions

—

Highly Endorsed

MAIL THIS TODAY

YOUR OPPORTUNITY

CUT HERE

MAIL ORDER

AUDEL, Publishers, 49 W. 23 St., NEW YORK 10, N. Y.

Please send me postpaid for FREE EXAMINATION books marked (x) below. If I decide to keep them I agree to mail $1 in 7 Days on each book or set ordered and further mail $1 monthly on each book or set until I have paid price, otherwise I will return them.

- ☐ MACHINISTS HANDY BOOK . . 1650 Pgs. . . $ 4
- ☐ WELDERS GUIDE, 400 Pages 1
- ☐ BLUE PRINT READING, 416 Pages 2
- ☐ MATHEMATICS & CALCULATIONS, 700 Pages. 2
- ☐ SHEET METAL PATTERN LAYOUTS, 1100 Pages 4
- ☐ SHEET METAL WORKERS HANDY BOOK, 388 Pgs. 1
- ☐ MECHANICAL DRAWING GUIDE, 160 Pages . . 1
- ☐ MECHANICAL DRAWING & DESIGN, 480 Pages 2
- ☐ AUTOMOBILE MECHANICS GUIDE, 1800 Pages 4
- ☐ DIESEL ENGINE MANUAL, 575 Pages 2
- ☐ AIRCRAFT WORKER, 240 Pages 1
- ☐ RADIOMANS GUIDE, 914 Pages 4
- ☐ ELECTRONIC DEVICES, 216 Pages 2
- ☐ ELECTRIC MOTOR GUIDE, 1000 Pages 4
- ☐ ELECTRIC WIRING DIAGRAMS, 272 Pages . . 1
- ☐ ELECTRICIANS EXAMINATIONS, 250 Pages. . 1
- ☐ ELECTRIC POWER CALCULATIONS, 425 Pages. 2
- ☐ HANDY BOOK OF ELECTRICITY, 1440 Pages. . 4
- ☐ ELECTRIC DICTIONARY, 9000 Terms 2
- ☐ ELECTRIC LIBRARY, 7000 Pages (12 Book Set) 18
- ☐ MARINE ENGINEERS HANDY BOOK, 1258 Pgs. 4
- ☐ SHIPFITTERS HANDY BOOK, 250 Pages . . . 1
- ☐ REFRIGERATION & Air Conditioning, 1280 Pgs. 4
- ☐ MILLWRIGHTS & MECHANICS GUIDE, 1200 Pgs. 4
- ☐ POWER PLANT ENGINEERS GUIDE, 1500 Pages 4
- ☐ ENGINEERS & FIREMANS EXAMS, 525 Pages . 1
- ☐ PUMPS, Hydraulics & Air Compressors, 1658 Pgs. 4
- ☐ ENGINEERS LIBRARY (3 Book Set) 9
- ☐ MECHANICAL DICTIONARY, 950 Pages 4
- ☐ GARDENERS & GROWERS GUIDES (4 Book Set) 6
- ☐ CARPENTERS & BUILDERS GUIDES (4 Book Set) 6
- ☐ PLUMBERS & Steamfitters Guides (4 Book Set) 6
- ☐ MASONS AND BUILDERS GUIDES (4 Book Set) 6
- ☐ PAINTERS & DECORATORS MANUAL, 450 Pgs. 2
- ☐ HOUSE HEATING GUIDE, 1000 Pages 4
- ☐ OIL BURNER GUIDE, 384 Pages 1

Name_____

Address_____

Occupation_____

Employed by_____ PAL